



## In Los Angeles, Big Donors and Public Schools Team up on Food Insecurity

Caroline Bermudez

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With summer quickly approaching, states are reopening, generating optimism that the economy will soon recover its footing. Judging by photos of crowded bars, restaurants and beaches, there are many Americans who believe the worst is over.

But hunger has spiked dramatically across the country as the demand at food banks has risen by as much as 600%. The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program does not provide enough benefits to cover need. On average, individuals received \$127 per month in 2018, while households received \$256 per month. The program, as indicated by its name, was not designed to meet full need. Food banks face mounting pressure to bridge the gap.

For children, aid has been slow. The Pandemic-EBT program created by Congress in March transfers the value of school meals onto electronic cards that families can use in grocery stores. [By May 15, only 15% of 30 million eligible children received benefits.](#)

Against this dire backdrop, the superintendent of the nation's second-largest school district and a member of one of America's most prominent families decided they could not wait for the government to act. After a roughly 20-minute phone call, a plan for one of the largest school hunger relief efforts in the country took shape.

### **A Powerful Collaboration**

Anthony Pritzker, whose family founded the Hyatt hotel chain, and Austin Beutner, superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, are longtime friends, having been classmates at Dartmouth College. Pritzker made a call to Beutner shortly after the district closed all of its schools due to COVID-19, asking how he was and what could he do to help. Feeding hungry people, Beutner said, was front of mind, knowing most LAUSD students live below the poverty line and that Los Angeles is home to many undocumented immigrants ineligible for government aid ([IP has written about community foundations stepping in to help students](#)). Pritzker offered to give \$250,000, but wanted to build something bigger.

“How do we put something together that first gets you money to start down this path, and second, sets a precedent so we can bring in other people to contribute?” Pritzker recounted of his phone call. “It took 20 minutes of brainstorming.”

Thus, the L.A. Students Most in Need charity was established. Since March 19, the program has raised approximately \$12 million and serves 500,000 meals a day to children and adults from 63 school facilities across the city staffed by LAUSD employees and Red Cross volunteers. The district leases refrigerated food trucks to store food and milk.

So far, over 20 million meals have been served. In addition to meals, the program gives books, baby supplies, toys donated by Mattel, and candy given by See's Candies to families. LAUSD also operates a hotline staffed by social workers and psychiatrists to provide mental health support, as well as connecting families to help with rental assistance and healthcare.

A survey of 100,000 families conducted by LAUSD shows the ravages of COVID-19 and the disproportionate amount of hardship suffered by low-income families. Approximately 70% of households make less than \$50,000 annually, and 35% less than \$25,000. Fifty-seven percent of respondents reported that someone in their family lost work due to the pandemic.

### **Other Donors Get on Board**

The response to the charity has been overwhelming, says Beutner. Luminaries across the entertainment industry have come forward to give, thanks to entreaties from Pritzker, who credits the superintendent for ultimately landing donations.

“I can bring somebody to the altar, but Austin is the one who marries them to the project,” he said.

A resident of Los Angeles for 28 years, Pritzker says his family’s extensive philanthropy influenced his decision to help LAUSD. “I come from a family where supporting a community and being part of a community is built into our DNA. What philanthropists should do is think of it as ‘There but for the grace of God go I.’ There’s national things you can do and all, but there’s plenty to do right in your own backyard. There are more needs than there are dollars, but this is not a time to give less, this is a time to give more.”

Donations include \$1 million from Reed Hastings, founder and CEO of Netflix. In an email response to IP, he wrote, “I’m very active in educational philanthropy and wanted to support an educational organization in L.A., where I spend a fair amount of time, that is helping students and families most in need.” He has also donated to One Family L.A., an emergency relief fund to meet families’ basic needs. (In April, Hastings donated \$30 million to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.)

The Chuck Lorre Family Foundation, the philanthropy of the creator of the hit TV shows “The Big Bang Theory” and “Two and a Half Men,” donated \$500,000 to LAUSD. (The foundation has given an estimated \$1 million to COVID-19 relief for immediate needs, including grants to the Burbank Unified School District, Cedars-Sinai, Children Mending Hearts, Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, DonorsChoose, Learning Lab Ventures, Midnight Mission, Saban Free Clinic, Venice Family Clinic, and more.)

Trisha Cardoso, president and chief giving officer of the Chuck Lorre Family Foundation, says Lorre's giving typically focuses on STEM education. Giving to COVID-19 relief is motivated by his time as a struggling young musician who visited free clinics for his medical care. Hollywood, she says, is eager to help.

"People are at home and they want to know what to do. The entertainment industry is so used to being nimble."

The Ballmer Group, the philanthropy of Steve Ballmer, former CEO of Microsoft and the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers basketball team, donated \$250,000.

Richard Lovett, president of Creative Artists Agency, an entertainment and sports agency, also contributed. He says, "CAA signed LAUSD as a pro-bono client in November. We are committed to doing whatever it takes to support the school district's priorities. I made a personal gift in the hopes that others might be inspired to do the same, and because I am fortunate to be in a position to do so."

L.A. Students Most in Need will continue until schools reopen so long as it keeps raising money, Beutner says.

Although the end of the academic year is approaching, school leaders like Mr. Beutner still have plenty of work ahead of them with summer school and determining whether schools reopen in the fall. LAUSD's anticipated start date is August 18, but Beutner says, "The reopening of schools will be guided by science." With a team comprising science experts from the University of California at Los Angeles, educators, students and parents, Beutner is working on a course of action.

For the first time, online summer school will be available to every student. LAUSD will provide credit recovery and intervention for students in danger of not graduating high school and students who are the furthest behind; instruction in math and English language arts for any interested student; and extracurricular programs, such as a virtual class presented by the guitar company Fender, which is sending up to 1,500 free guitars to participating middle-school students and teachers. In addition, the filmmaker James Cameron, director of "Avatar" and "Titanic," will lead a high school class through "Voyage of the Titanic" to learn about the biology and physics involved in underwater exploration.

Illumination, the film and animation studio, will teach students how to draw and make their own animations.

Such splashy offerings, Beutner says, are meant to be comparable to those normally given to affluent students. “As the place we’re learning from shifts from school to home, we have to make sure students are engaged and interested, because students being in a classroom are a captive audience. You shift to home, it’s harder, there are distractions.”

### **Straining to Meet Needs, With Budget Cuts Ahead**

Since the early days of the crisis, LAUSD has managed to provide at least 98% of its students with internet devices, and thanks to a partnership with Verizon, free internet access.

All these programs come at a cost. LAUSD incurred \$200 million in expenses related to COVID-19. As states face severe budget shortfalls within the next few months, Beutner is adamant that LAUSD should not be on the chopping block when lawmakers weigh what to cut.

“The consequence of cuts will impact children and their ability to learn, and the life that they’ll have. That’s a very real harm. We should not allow a health crisis to become an education crisis. So going back to school means not less investment, it has to mean more. It’s going to cost more because we have to continue to invest in digital devices and connectivity, it’s going to cost because we need to keep schools sanitized and buy personal protective equipment, it’s going to cost more because the mental health needs will be much, much greater than when we left school just a few months ago, and it’s going to cost more because students will have had a six-plus-month gap in classroom learning, who will need more support.”

Philanthropy, Beutner says, can show the government that programs like L.A. Students Most in Need are the fastest way to connect students and their families to basic needs.

“Philanthropy should provide risk capital or demonstrate the efficacy of a particular idea, or where there’s need, so public funding will follow.”