



October 12, 2020

Dear Whatcom County School Superintendents:

This letter is an update to my previous one of August 31, 2020 on school operations and planning for COVID-19. Since then, there have been updates to *Schools – Fall 2020-2021 Guidance* (DOH, updated 9/2/20), and *Decision Tree for Provision of In Person Learning among K-12 Students at Public and Private Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic* (DOH, updated 9/15/20), and new guidelines issued by Washington Interscholastic Activities Association, *Return-to-Play Guidelines* (10/6/20) and by OSPI/DOH/L&I *Employer Health & Safety Requirements for School Scenarios* (9/30/20).

The *DOH Decision Tree* describes three levels of community transmission, based on the 14-day case rate, the number of cases over 14 days per 100,000 people. These levels are low (<25 cases/100K/14 days), moderate (25-75), and high (>75), with associated education modalities from remote learning, to hybrid (remote and in-person) instruction, to primarily in-person instruction, with consideration of in-person services/instruction for high-need students. The *WIAA Return-to-Play Guidelines* also describe permitted sport activities based on these three levels and community test positivity rates above or below 5%.

Whatcom testing information and case rates are available online. (See the Phase and Risk Assessment and the COVID-19 Disease Activity tabs at <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/3427/COVID-19-Data>). These are usually updated daily by WA DOH. On 8/26/20 the Whatcom County 14-day case rate had decreased to 26.2 per 100,000 people. Since then, the rate has risen, reaching 71.5 on 9/21/20 and recently appeared to flatten and slightly decrease, reaching 64.8 on 9/25/20. Our test positivity rates have consistently been less than 5%.

We remain in the Moderate COVID-19 Activity Level with case rates 25-75, although our recent upward trajectory raises concern that we could exceed 75 and enter the High Activity range. Sustained elevation of case rates in the high range will require constriction of in-person school operations to remote learning. If case rates remain elevated above 75 for over two weeks, if elevated and rapidly rising, or if elevated with multiple associated school outbreaks, I will recommend a return to operations consistent with high community infection rates.

We use the case rates for the county in considering school district operational levels given the economic and social interconnections within Whatcom County and the impact of elevated infection rates of neighboring communities, counties, and regions on one another.

We anticipate that COVID-19 infections will occur among students and staff of schools and it is the effectiveness of the measures taken to suppress transmission within schools and our communities that will allow us to sustain safe operations of our schools and businesses. To the extent that community infection rates can be reduced through physical distancing, use of face coverings to reduce transmission by those who are infected, minimizing size of gatherings, and hand hygiene, we can maintain and eventually open up operations. In addition, when infections occur it is critical to identify them early, for those who are infected to isolate themselves from others while contagious, and for their close contacts to quarantine during the time they could become infectious after exposure. Therefore,



schools need to assure that students and staff who are infected or are close contacts to cases are excluded from school for the duration of their isolation or quarantine periods. This will reduce the risk of transmission at school and prevent outbreaks that could result in closures, health risks to others, and disruption of instruction for many.

WCHD will continue to monitor the case rate and other metrics to determine when to issue our recommendation that schools open full in-person operations if rates sustain a drop to Low COVID-19 Activity levels, or to stop in-person learning if the case rate has a sustained rise, but school districts or private schools make the final decision and assure they comply with the Governor's Proclamation (most recently 20.09.2), OSPI/DOH/L&I requirements, and the DOH K12 Guidance and Decision Tree. Students designated as high need individuals can continue to have in-person instruction in small groups even during the High COVID-19 Activity Level.

WCHD will continue to provide technical assistance to schools as they implement the requirements and recommendations for COVID-19 transmission control, and will take the lead and cooperate with schools in response to cases and outbreaks, provide case and contact investigation, support isolation of cases and quarantine of their close contacts, and provide documentation of when affected individuals can return to school. We will also determine whether classrooms or schools must close in response to outbreaks and when they may reopen.

We continue to recommend a cautious, slow phased-in approach to resuming in-person learning, and recognize the challenge to providing a safe environment for the critical educational and developmental opportunities and support services that children need and that schools must provide.

Sincerely,



Greg Stern MD, Health Officer

REQUIREMENTS (PROCLAMATIONS, REGULATIONS, GUIDELINES)

PROCLAMATION BY THE GOVERNOR AMENDING PROCLAMATIONS 20-05, 20-08, 20-09, and 20-09.1 20-09.2 - Phased Reopening of K-12 Schools

https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/proclamations/20.09.2%20COVID19%20Phased%20Reopening%20of%20K12%20Schools.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

EMPLOYER HEALTH & SAFETY REQUIREMENTS FOR SCHOOL SCENARIOS, September 30, 2020 (OSPI/DOH/L&I)

<https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/communications/Employer-Health-and-Safety-Requirements-for-School-Scenarios.pdf>

Decision Tree for Provision of In Person Learning among K-12 Students at Public and Private Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic (DOH) (updated 9/15/20)

<https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/DecisionTree-K12schools.pdf> K-12

Schools – Fall 2020-2021 Guidance (DOH, updated 9/2/20)

<https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/FallGuidanceK-12.pdf>

Return to Play Guidelines (WIAA, 10/6/20)

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vQBoiz1UnhXtci0yuLS5ekxbIUiZiQyu7eHR2RovekTWHvxj-Gvh71hfzZW0ghd19bop3KZxjpy5Kg2/pub>