



December 20, 2020

Dear Whatcom County School Superintendents:

On November 24, 2020, I issued a strong recommendation to roll-back in-person instruction for middle and high school students in response to an elevated and steep rise in COVID-19 case rates in Whatcom County and in keeping with the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) guidance in place at that time. Elementary schools were to continue their phasing in of in-person instruction and high-need students were to be provided in-person services.

Given what has been learned about schools and COVID-19 transmission and new state guidance, I now recommend phasing in of hybrid and in-person instruction for middle and high school students, with emphasis on assuring full implementation of COVID-19 mitigation measures.

On December 16, 2020 Governor Inslee issued *Proclamation 20-9.3 – Phased Reopening of K-12 Schools* and DOH issued new guidance, *K-12 2020-2021 Guidance*, and revised its former *Decision Tree (10/16/20)* to a new guide for decision-making, *Tools to Prepare for Provision of In Person Learning among K-12 Students at Public and Private Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

Proclamation 20-9.3 recognizes that implementation of COVID-19 control measures have allowed safe operation of schools with limited transmission of infection within schools despite marked increase in community transmission rates. The numbers of cases and outbreaks have been higher in communities with higher rates, but the size of outbreaks within schools remained limited. It recognizes the importance of in-person instruction and the educational, psychological, and social costs of the closure of schools early in the pandemic and suspension of full in-person instruction when schools reopened in the fall. It requires schools to follow the DOH *K-12 2020-2021 Guidance* and the DOH/OSPI/L&I *School Employer Health and Safety Requirements (9/30/20)*. It prohibits all school districts from conducting in-person instruction unless they ensure that each of specified standards is met that pertain to health and safety and to COVID-19 prevention plans.

The proclamation notes "...the CDC recently recommended that K-12 schools should be the last settings to close after all other mitigation measures have been employed, and the first to reopen when they can do so safely;" and "schools will continue to be prepared to be flexible to pivot in whole or in part to distance learning if there is a COVID-19 outbreak in their county or within their school community and to follow guidance from the Department of Health, the Department of Labor & Industries (L&I), and the Superintendent of Public Instruction to help mitigate risk to students, teachers, and the community."

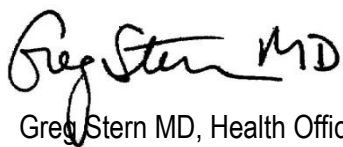
The *Tools* document provides a background section describing the experience since schools reopened in the



fall and research that indicates that although cases and outbreaks of COVID-19 occur among school staff and students, that with the implementation of COVID-19 measures ongoing transmission within schools has not been sustained. In light of what has been learned about transmission of COVID-19 within schools, the community transmission rate thresholds for recommending modified school operations have been raised. They are considered along with other metrics (COVID-19 mitigation measures in place in schools, public health capacity to monitor COVID-19 activity and respond to cases and outbreaks) to guide school decisions on level of operations. When rates are low (14-day case count under 50/100,000 people), full in-person instruction is recommended. When rates are moderate (50-350/100,000), DOH recommends careful phasing in of in-person learning starting with elementary and middle school students and adding high school when rates drop below 200. DOH recommends in-person learning for pre-K through grade 5 and students with the highest needs from any grade when rates are high (over 350/100,000),

Per DOH, “These metrics are not intended to serve as hard thresholds but as a primary consideration in determining for whom to provide in-person learning.” The new framework emphasizes school COVID-19 mitigation measures during operations as the primary response to rising community COVID-19 rates, when operations continue to maintain health and safety. Individual cases and close contacts will be isolated and quarantined routinely in response to cases among staff or students. Classrooms or schools may be required to temporarily close to control outbreaks. Pausing phase-in or rolling back of operations to remote learning may be indicated if community transmission rates exceed the ability of other community mitigation measures to reduce those rates or if schools are unable to implement effective measures to suppress transmission within schools.

Whatcom County Health Department will continue to provide technical assistance to schools and information about COVID-19 activity in the community and public health capacity to respond, and to consult on school district operations on implementation of COVID-19 mitigation requirements or recommendations. We share in the goal of assuring the best education and support for students in our county, and for students and staff to be in safe schools.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Greg Stern MD". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "G" and "S".

Greg Stern MD, Health Officer

Attachment: Appendix – Requirements and References re: COVID-19 and School Operations/Planning



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REQUIREMENTS

Proclamation 20-09.3 – Phased Reopening of K-12 Schools (12/16/20)

https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/proclamations/proc_20-09.3.pdf

K-12 Schools 2020-2021 Guidance (DOH, 12/16/20)

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

School Employer Health and Safety Requirements (DOH/OSPI/L&I, 9/30/20),

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

WA COVID-19 Risk Assessment Dashboard (DOH)

<https://coronavirus.wa.gov/what-you-need-know/covid-19-risk-assessment-dashboard>

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

<http://wiaa.com/ConDocs/Con1911/Return-To-Play%20Guidelines.pdf>

REFERENCES

Tools to Prepare for Provision of In-Person Learning among K-12 Students at Public and Private Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic (DOH, 12/16/20)

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

WA COVID-19 Risk Assessment Dashboard

<https://coronavirus.wa.gov/what-you-need-know/covid-19-risk-assessment-dashboard>

