



September 23, 2020

Schelli Slaughter, MHA
Director

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Health Officer

Dear Thurston County Superintendents and K-12 Educators,

In my last [letter to you on July 30, 2020](#), I recommended distance learning for the fall term for all K-12 schools in Thurston County because the cases of COVID-19 were rising at an alarming rate. Thank you for your diligence in heeding my recommendation and providing your students with distance learning models for the beginning of the school year. As I have watched the case counts decrease and Thurston County residents taking action to slow the spread, I am now recommending a slow, careful, phased approach to resume in-person learning prioritizing high-need students.

When I made my previous recommendation in July, our cases had risen from less than 25 new cases per 100,000 people over two weeks at the beginning of July to 60.5 new cases per 100,000 people during a two-week period on July 29th. At that time, it appeared Thurston County was on track to exceed 75 cases per 100,000 population by the start of school. I communicated to you I would watch our transmission rates after the Labor Day holiday to see if we experienced another spike. I am pleased to say, after a full incubation period of 14 days, there has not been a spike. As of September 19, 2020, our transmission rate is 30.8 cases per 100,000 people. This data gives me the confidence to allow a slow, careful, phased approach to resume in-person learning.

The Department of Health released [K-12 Schools – Fall 2020-2021 Guidance](#) and [Decision Tree for Provision of In Person Learning among K-12 Students at Public and Private Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) on August 5, 2020. These documents provide guidelines for when to initiate in-person learning and the factors that must be considered to ensure this is done safely. Some of these factors include community transmission rates, access to testing, health care capacity, school resources, and public health capacity for adequate contact tracing and case investigation. The [Decision Tree](#) recommendations for

schools are based on three levels of community transmission rates, high (>75 cases per 100K over 14 days), moderate (25-75 cases per 100K over 14 days) and low (< 25 cases per 100K over 14 days). Thurston County is currently in the moderate transmission range.

I support each educational institution as they prepare for and gradually phase in more in-person instruction with the requisite robust COVID-19 safety protocols, communication plans, and coordination with Thurston County Public Health and Social Services (PHSS) in accordance with [Washington State Department of Health guidance](#), [Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction \(OSPI\) guidance](#), and [CDC guidance](#) in the way that best suits the unique needs of the community they serve.

PHSS has partnered with school districts and developed a [Communications Plan](#). This plan outlines the flow of communication between parties, when a classroom will be closed, and when a school may be closed due to students or teachers testing positive for COVID-19. In order to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in school, isolation of individuals with probable or confirmed COVID-19 and quarantine of close contacts is vital. Students or teachers in isolation or quarantine will not be able to attend school. The ability of schools to operate may be affected by these restrictions. Outbreaks within a classroom or school may require interruption of in-person learning to stop the spread of disease.

If our community transmission rates of COVID-19 increase at an alarming rate, I may require restrictions of in-person learning until transmission rates return to moderate or low levels. I will monitor our key indicators to help guide me in my decision making. These include trends in the 14-day case rate per 100,000 population, the percent of COVID-19 positive tests, hospital and intensive care capacity, trends in quantity and types of outbreaks, and PHSS's capacity for timely case investigation and contact tracing.

I will continue to make recommendations to protect the health and safety of all of those who work and learn in our schools based on the best available science. When school districts and schools follow all the provided guidance outlined we can ensure, to the extent possible, sustainability of a school environment where in-person learning is safe for all who work and learn in our schools. I look forward to partnering with you in the days ahead to achieve this goal.

Sincerely,



Dimyana Abdelmalek, MD, MPH

Health Officer, Thurston County