

Letter to the Community: November 10, 2020

Hello Thurston County! Last week I made the difficult decision to [recommend](#) remote learning for our K-12 students in Thurston County until January 2021 with the exception of cohorts of six students, prioritizing those with the highest needs. This decision is supported by the [K-12 Decision Tree](#) as our county is experiencing consistently high transmission rates since October 23, 2020, per the [Governor's Risk Assessment Dashboard](#).

This elevation in community transmission in our county has led to outbreaks in workplaces, long-term care facilities, and educational settings. Our current patterns of transmission in Thurston County are affecting families where once one member gets sick, other members of the household are likely to get sick, including school aged children. There have been instances of children coming to school when they were instructed to quarantine and then developing COVID-19 after spending time in the educational setting. Children who come to school while infectious pose a risk to both other children and the staff who teach and support them.

Small groups of learners and instructors who stay together in cohorts and who have followed the mitigation measures in place, including symptom screening, mask wearing, maintaining six feet of distance or more, and enhanced cleaning per CDC guidelines have been safe in our county. I am recommending these opportunities continue in small groups of six with a focus on learners with the highest needs.

Keeping our schools safe is dependent on the ability to quickly identify people who are sick and those who are at risk of becoming sick and giving them instructions on how to take care of themselves and prevent others from getting sick. Our public health capacity has been stretched by this increase in cases and we are scaling up in our response to meet this need.

Our transmission rates have continued to rise at a rapid rate over the past month. Our hospital capacity has been impacted by the rise in people with COVID-19 who have experienced severe illness both in our county and the surrounding counties who are served by our hospitals. We are experiencing an increase in long-term care facility outbreaks, currently eleven ongoing outbreaks, which has led to an increase in people who are at high risk and may need hospital care. Hospital capacity is critical to our capacity to respond to COVID-19 in our community.

As winter approaches, I am concerned cases will rise in our county as the weather gets colder and people spend more time indoors. The start of flu season also poses an additional stress on our response. There are multiple respiratory viral illnesses in our community and the number of cases of these other illnesses will likely rise as they do every year in winter. While I am encouraged by the way our community has taken to wearing masks, maintaining a physical distance, and hand hygiene which help reduce the spread of viral respiratory illnesses, we are seeing more reports of respiratory illness including increased cases of COVID-19 in our community.

My recommendation is made based on our local patterns of transmission, rising transmission rates, hospital capacity, public health capacity, and our likely trajectory of disease going into winter. This is a novel virus and as more is learned from state and national experience my guidance may change to reflect the best available data and guidance. My goal is to have in-person learning opportunities for K-12

students in a way which is safe for everyone who works and learns in our schools and Thurston County as a whole.

The winter will likely bring us more challenges as we combat the COVID-19 pandemic, but I am sure working together we can slow the spread of COVID-19 and start taking steps toward a safe return to public life.

Wishing you the best of health,

Dimyana Abdelmalek, MD, MPH
Thurston County Health Officer