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PUBLIC HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT

January 15, 2021

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Dear Thurston County Educational Community,

This letter is to advise you of Thurston County's current levels of COVID-19 activity and key health indicators you may use to guide you in deciding when and at what level to consider expanding in-person learning in accordance with [Washington State Department of Health \(DOH\) guidance](#). Thurston County's current COVID-19 activity level falls in the moderate activity range for schools. Based on the information and data below, I advise schools to plan for safely phasing in expanded in-person learning modalities, prioritizing elementary and middle school students as soon as January 25, 2021 with high school students following when transmission rates decline below 200 cases per 100K over 14 days. As health officer, I hereby affirm:

- **Thurston County Public Health and Social Services (PHSS) has the capacity to investigate confirmed COVID-19 cases, quarantine their close contacts, and assess whether transmission is occurring in our local schools.**
 - We have a dedicated team of case investigators, contact tracers, and outbreak response personnel assigned and ready to exclusively support schools.
 - We have established a dedicated hotline for schools to report cases and outbreaks.
 - We have developed a joint communication plan in order to prevent and respond to COVID-19 cases and quickly share important health and safety information with educational professionals, students, and families.
- **There is adequate testing for COVID-19 available in Thurston County.** Testing locations can be found [here](#).
- **Thurston County Public Health and Social Services can monitor** the level of community spread to determine when a change in education modality is needed.
- **Thurston County's current rate per 100k of newly diagnosed confirmed and probably COVID-19 cases over the last two weeks is 236.2.**
- Thurston County's **test positive rate is currently 9.6%.**
- The West Region trend in 14-day rate of new COVID-19 hospital admissions per 100K population is **increasing (+3)** as of 1/8/2021.
- Thurston County's trend in cases is currently increasing over 14 days.
- All Thurston County school districts are currently offering in-person small group instruction and have successfully demonstrated their ability to limit transmission in the school environment.
 - Public health experts have reviewed school health and safety plans and are offering on-site technical assistance and assessment visits upon request.

Public health officials across our state and country have projected an increase in case and hospitalization trends this month. When trends are increasing, it is recommended to pause expansion of additional in-

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person learning and maintain current access for small groups. That is the basis for the recommendation I made to you in my January 5, 2021 [letter](#). I anticipate in the next week we will see the impact of any post-holiday peak and will see trends flatten and hopefully decline, creating ideal conditions to safely expand in-person learning in our community this winter quarter. I will continue to closely monitor our local conditions and provide another update on January 21st to share the latest data so you may factor that into your upcoming transition plans.

The [Institute for Disease Modeling](#) (IDM) studies illustrate, while the risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools increase as community transmission rates increase, countermeasures including cohorts, symptom screening, robust contact tracing, and non-pharmaceutical interventions such as mask wearing, physical distancing, hand hygiene, and ventilation can mitigate these risks and are highly effective in reducing school transmission.

This novel virus is dynamic and ever changing. Balancing health and educational risks and benefits for our educators and students is one of the greatest challenges we have faced. I have heard from many educators as well as student families who are worried and fearful of either going back to school too soon or not quickly enough.

I take my duty to protect the health of everyone who works and learn in our schools from contagious diseases very seriously and this is at the heart of every recommendation I have given. I know everyone is suffering from both direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19 and we all want to return to a semblance of normalcy.

Schools are the pillars of our community and I am confident that by following our state health guidance, and continuing to learn and work together, our schools can be a safe and healthy harbor amid this pandemic here in Thurston County. I commend you for your efforts to create safe learning environments for our children and educational professionals. I look forward to our continued partnership.

Thank you,

Dimyana Abdelmalek, MD, MPH
Health Officer, Thurston County