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PUBLIC HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT

January 5, 2021

Schelli Slaughter, MHA
Director

Dimyana Abdelmalek, MD, MPH
Health Officer

Dear Thurston County Superintendents and Heads of Schools,

I am writing to inform you of new data and guidance regarding the safety of in-person learning opportunities in the school setting.

In my last letter on November 6, 2020, I recommended a return to distance learning in light of high and increasing transmission rates in Thurston County. Our county, and indeed much of the state, experienced a rapid increase in transmission rates and on November 17, 2020, Governor Inslee announced new restrictions to change the trajectory of disease for Washington State. I am continuing to closely monitor COVID-19 transmission throughout the county.

On December 16, 2020, the Governor announced [new metrics for in-person learning](#) in Washington State. High COVID-19 activity under the new metrics is greater than 350 cases per hundred thousand population over 14 days, moderate activity is 50-350 cases per hundred thousand population over 14 days, and low transmission is <50 cases per hundred thousand population over 14 days. These new metrics are based upon the experiences of schools across Washington State and the country and include case transmission rates, test positivity rates, as well as trends in cases and hospitalizations. Additionally, in this new guidance, the definition of small groups has been updated to no more than fifteen students provided there is sufficient space to maintain a distance of 6 feet or more between students.

Reports from the Institute for Disease Modeling suggests that while the risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools increases as community transmission rates increase, public health interventions including grouping students into cohorts, screening for symptoms, mask wearing, physical distancing, hand hygiene, and robust contact tracing can mitigate this risk. Additional modeling suggests using a hybrid or phased in approach, prioritizing K-5 students, can further lower this risk.

Currently, Thurston County is in the moderate COVID-19 activity range where in-person learning for elementary school and middle school is recommended, provided strict safety guidelines described in the Washington State Department of Health [K-12 Schools 2020-2021 Guidance](#) is followed. We have seen significant increases in transmission after holidays so I am closely watching our hospitalizations, outbreaks, and public health capacity to respond should we see an increase from the recent holidays. I am also monitoring new developments regarding the new strain of COVID-19.

If Thurston County continues to stay in the moderate transmission range (50-350 cases per 100K over 14 days) for a majority of days for three weeks after the New Year's holiday and there is sufficient testing, hospital, and public health capacity, I will recommend cautiously starting in-person learning for elementary and middle school students. This recommendation will include using a hybrid model and small groups in alignment with the Washington State Department of Health guidelines and the best available modeling.

The COVID-19 pandemic in our county is dynamic. If the situation changes, my guidance may also change to reflect the best available science and data. I commend you for your efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and look forward to partnering with you to keep those who work and learn in our schools safe and healthy.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "D Abdelmalek, MD". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dimyana Abdelmalek MD, MPH
Health Officer, Thurston County