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PUBLIC HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT

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Dear Thurston County Superintendents and Heads of Schools,

Since I released my recommendation to open schools to in-person instruction in a cautious phased in approach to in-person learning for K-5 and middle school students, I have been asked many different versions of the same three questions from our Thurston County school community. I am addressing each of those questions below and ask you to please share this information with your respective school communities, as you see fit.

1) Why are you recommending hybrid at this time when the vaccine is nearly available to school staff?

I base my local recommendations on the [Washington State Department of Health guidelines](#) for in-person learning opportunities in schools. These state guidelines are based on the experiences of schools across the state and country that have been providing in-person learning opportunities at different levels of transmission.

Mental health related emergency room visits in young people have increased since the pandemic began. Pediatricians in our county reported seeing significant numbers of youth in their practices who were struggling. Further, there is an equity component as not all children have access to the means to engage in remote learning. Some children have a variety of their needs usually met at school which cannot be adequately addressed in the remote learning model. When I offer recommendations, I consider all factors affecting the health and well-being of those in our educational communities.

Modeling data and school experiences across Washington State have shown mitigation measures, including cohorts, symptom screening, robust contact tracing, and non-pharmaceutical interventions such as mask wearing, physical distancing, hand hygiene, and ventilation mitigate these risks and are highly effective in reducing school transmission. Vaccine supply is limited and when we will receive adequate supply is unknown. It may take months before educators and staff are eligible for vaccine and then weeks until they are fully protected. We have the tools we know will work to limit risk of transmission in schools. We know there is a significant need for in-person learning and we must respond to that need for the health and well-being of the youth in our community.

2) What gives you confidence we can operate schools safely in a hybrid model with the current levels of community transmission being at their highest levels, or close to?

Schools have had small groups of students in their buildings for many months. The schools are using screening and mitigation measures as set by state guidance and have carefully developed processes in

place to handle an increase of students in the hybrid model. Many districts and private schools throughout the state have operated at increased levels of transmission. What data and experience has shown us is, while there were cases in schools related to levels of COVID-19 activity in the community, mitigation measures and robust collaboration between schools, families, and the public health department lowered the risk of transmission within the schools.

Thurston County Public Health and Social Services has the capacity to investigate confirmed COVID-19 cases, quarantine their contacts, and assess whether transmission is occurring in our schools. We have a dedicated team of case investigators, contact tracers, and outbreak response personnel ready to support schools. We have a dedicated line to support schools reporting cases and outbreaks. We have also developed a joint communication plan with schools to prevent and respond to COVID-19 cases and quickly share important information with educational professionals, students, and families.

3) Do you have any information on how soon we will be able to offer the vaccine to all school staff? Will it matter where staff live or only where they work?

Thurston County is currently vaccinating those in [Phase 1A and Phase 1B Tier 1](#). Due to the limited supply of vaccine, not everyone will be able to access the vaccine right away. Access will improve as the supply chain widens and providers in Thurston County receive more doses. In our county, we have a significant number of people eligible for the vaccine in the Phase 1B Tier 1 category. Based on current projections, it will likely take us several months to get the majority of those in this category who want vaccine, vaccinated.

We are moving in phases and through the tiers in a chronological order, therefore, for teachers and support staff in Tier B2 and B4, it will likely be late spring before there is vaccine available for this population. Both of the available vaccines require two doses, 3-4 weeks apart, so it will take even longer to reach the full benefits of the vaccine. We are planning to help vaccinate educational staff in phase when vaccine becomes available. Individuals can get vaccine in the county where they live or where they work.

As you all know, Thurston County's response to COVID-19 is very dynamic. I will continue to provide you with updates as additional information is available or the situation changes. Thank you all for your hard work and dedication to our community. I commend your efforts to create safe learning environments for our children and educational professionals.

Sincerely,



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Health Officer, Thurston County