

## Letter to the Community: September 23, 2020

Hello Thurston County!

Earlier today, I released a [letter to Thurston County Superintendents and K-12 Educators](#) with my recommendation for K-12 schools in our county to take a slow, careful, phased approach to resume in-person learning prioritizing high-need students. I made this decision because COVID-19 activity in our county has decreased and I have confidence we can sustain lower transmission rates. People in our community are making great efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19 by wearing face coverings, maintaining a physical distance of 6 feet or more with non-household members, limiting their gatherings to less than 10 people, and frequently washing their hands. I want to commend the residents in our county for following these preventative measures because the data I have seen shows these efforts are working.

On July 30, 2020, when I recommended distance learning for fall term with an option for in-person learning opportunities for cohorts of five students, our new cases per 100,000 over 14 days had risen from less than 25 at the beginning of the month to 60.5 on July 29, 2020. Our disease trajectory at that time appeared to be rising rapidly and was on course to be in the high community transmission range (>75 cases per 100K over 14 days) by September when most schools were scheduled to start. Since that time, our transmission rates have remained in the moderate transmission risk category (25-75 cases per 100K over 14 days) and have been steadily declining. I am happy to report I did not see a spike in cases as a result of celebrations over Labor Day weekend.

When schools resume in-person learning, they are to follow Washington State Department of Health [Decision Tree](#) framework and [guidance](#), [Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction \(OSPI\) guidance](#), and [CDC guidance](#). I recommend schools follow a slow, careful, phased approach to resume in-person learning instruction.

Each of our schools and districts across our county is different and this gradual reopening may look different depending on the specific needs of the communities being served. There is no one size fits all approach to a return to in-person learning. As the school year progresses, Thurston County Public Health and Social Services (PHSS) will be available to support each of our K-12 institutions as they navigate providing in-person learning opportunities while maintaining a safe learning and working environment for all.

As the year progresses, I anticipate there will be positive COVID-19 cases in our schools and there are plans for how to identify people who have been exposed to the virus and plans for how to stop the spread of the virus in a school setting. If there is concern of an outbreak within a classroom or school, there may be an interruption of in-person learning to stop the spread of disease. For the safety of students and our community, as we cautiously expand in-person learning, schools will also need to be able to transition to remote learning for some students when the situation requires it.

Keeping our schools open requires low community transmission rates and the capacity to take care of people who become severely ill, as well as the public health capacity for effective case investigation and contact tracing. To decrease the risk of community spread, I continue to advise wearing a face covering when in public, maintaining a distance of six feet or more from non-household members, staying home when you are sick, avoiding large gatherings greater than 10 people, washing your hands, and covering

your cough. It is also essential for people who are sick and people who were in close contact with someone who is sick to follow public health instructions. Our entire community has a large role to play in keeping our schools open for in-person learning.

Going forward, PHSS will continue to partner with our schools to ensure, to the extent possible, this return to in-person learning is safe and sustainable. I will continue to monitor our key indicators including transmission rates, percent positive test rates, hospital capacity, public health capacity, and changes in transmission patterns within our community. I look forward to partnering with all of you in keeping our community safe and healthy this fall.

Wishing you the best of health,

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