



August 31, 2020

Dear Whatcom County School Superintendents:

This letter is to inform you of significant changes in COVID-19 activity in Whatcom County, my support for utilizing the DOH Decision Tree, and to give a strong recommendation to take a cautious, slow phased in approach to resuming in-person learning.

Since my August 4, 2020 letter to Whatcom County School Superintendents, there have been encouraging changes in the rates of COVID-19 infection within Whatcom County and the region. This summer we saw the rate for Whatcom county increasing from 18 in early June to 46 in mid-July, then to 63 in late-July, with a trajectory that appeared to be heading to exceed 75 by September. Case rates have now declined to 33 as of August 18. On Aug 5, 2020, the Department of Health (DOH) issued [K-12 Schools – Fall 2020-2021 Guidance](#) and [Decision Tree for Provision of In Person Learning among K-12 Students at Public and Private Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). These provide detailed guidelines on whether and how to provide in-person learning based on community infection transmission rates, school resources, plans, and practices for COVID-19 prevention and response, and public health and healthcare capacity for timely testing, case investigation, and contract tracing. With the encouraging change in rates of community transmission, I support schools in planning to operate within these guidelines when they are prepared to implement the measures appropriate for current or higher transmission levels, to expand services slowly, and to be prepared to constrict should conditions require restriction measures.

The DOH *Decision Tree* describes three levels of community transmission, based on the number of cases over 14 days per 100,000 people. These levels are low (<25 cases/100K/14 days), moderate (25-75), and high (>75), with associated education modalities from remote learning, to hybrid (remote and in-person) instruction, to primarily in-person instruction, with consideration of in-person services/instruction for high-need students. I continue to recommend starting with remote learning with in-person services for high-need students as previously planned, then a slow, phased in expansion of in person learning in order to allow schools to prepare for more in-person instruction, to test their COVID-19 safety protocols, more fully implement their new remote learning programs, and more easily respond to changes in the local situation.

Whatcom County Health Department provides technical assistance to Whatcom County Schools in implementing the DOH *Guidance* and *Decision Tree*, and in preparation for responses to COVID-19 cases, contacts, and outbreaks within schools. While offering support for planning and operations, the health department is also responsible for control of infectious diseases. Individuals who are infected or are close contacts to those who are infected will be excluded from school during their isolation or quarantine periods. This may affect the ability of the school to operate. Outbreaks may require interruption of in-person learning in order to suppress ongoing transmission should opening or continued operation of in-person learning pose an imminent public health threat. Should community transmission rates increase, schools may need to constrict in-person activities until rates return to moderate or low levels. This potential disruption is why I strongly recommend a slow expansion of services to ensure as much as possible sustainability of school and community conditions and infection rates through monitoring transmission and the effectiveness of control measures.

We will continue to work with our local school districts to successfully provide a safe and sustainable transition to in-person learning.

Sincerely,

Greg Stern MD, Health Officer

