January 19, 2021

Dear Whatcom County School Superintendents:

Prior to the winter school break, on December 20, 2020, I last wrote to you about major changes in the Governor's and DOH requirements and recommendations on school operations and COVID-19. After the winter break, as schools resumed operations and phased in more operations, we have experienced a steep rise in COVID-19 rates in Whatcom County. We have not changed our recommendations from December 20, and I am providing the clarification you requested about the action thresholds and mitigation measures cited in the DOH recommendations.

Schools remaining open as COVID-19 community infection rates increase
Research and experience have shown that if the required measures are taken to limit transmission of COVID-19, schools can safely phase in in-person instruction. This has been true even as communities experience elevated rates of infection.

Careful, phased reintroduction of in-person instruction allows schools to assure measures for infection control are implemented at the same time as they monitor for transmission during in-person learning. Phased reintroduction of in-person learning starts with the younger grades (where transmission risk is less) and high-need students in all grades before gradually adding middle and secondary school grades.

Requirements and Decision-making Guidance
Schools are required to follow the Governor's proclamations, most recently *Proclamation 20-9.3 – Phased Reopening of K-12 Schools* (12/16/20), *K-12 2020-2021 Guidance (DOH, 12/16/20)*, and *School Employer Health and Safety Requirements* (DOH/OSPI/L&I, 9/30/20)

An additional document, *Tools to Prepare for Provision of In-Person Learning among K-12 Students at Public and Private Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic* (DOH, 12/16/20), provides guidance and the underlying evidence for school decision-making regarding operations. It also describes indicators and other factors to be considered:

> "*When recommending guiding metrics to resume in-person learning, DOH considered both the health risks of COVID-19 to students, school staff, and the surrounding community; as well as the benefits of in-person school to children and their families. These metrics are not intended to serve as a hard thresholds [sic] but as a primary consideration in determining for whom to provide in-person learning.*"

The metrics include:

509 Girard Street
Bellingham, WA 98225-4005
360.778.6000 | FAX 360.778.6001
WhatcomCountyHealth
WhatcomCoHealth

Whatcom County
HEALTH
Department

1500 North State Street
Bellingham, WA 98225-4551
360.778.6100 | FAX 360.778.6101
www.whatcomcounty.us/health

- community infection rates
- public health capacity to identify cases and their contacts and exclude them from school for isolation and quarantine
- public health capacity to monitor infection rates and inform schools.

Mitigation Measures Work to Suppress Transmission

When community transmission rates increase, we anticipate more students and staff with asymptomatic or early symptomatic infection will be at school. However, there have been relatively few outbreaks in schools in Washington State since this fall, despite some counties having rates that exceeded the current elevated rates in Whatcom County. Schools offer a more controlled environment with many layers of protection in place to prevent COVID-19 transmission.
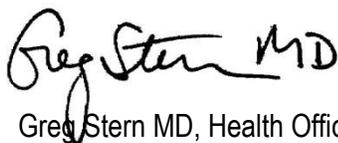
From our discussions with DOH we've learned that many of the school-related outbreaks occurred when recommended mitigation measures had not been implemented. This is why face-covering, distancing, and reducing sizes of groups/classes (cohorting) are crucial to suppressing transmission, in addition to handwashing, environmental cleaning, and improving ventilation.

Schools in Whatcom County have been in varying stages of reopening since September, and they have successfully demonstrated their ability to implement mitigation strategies, monitor students and staff for symptoms, and quickly identify cases and contacts and exclude them from school. Less than 1% of all cases in Whatcom County since mid-October have been traced to contact that occurred during in-person learning. For these reasons, WCHD does not see a need to scale back in-person learning for whole grades or schools.

When community transmission rates rise, "K-12 schools should be the last settings to close after all other mitigation measures have been employed, and the first to reopen when they can do so safely," according to the CDC. Short of closing or rolling back operations, schools can remain flexible; enhance the grouping of students and cohorting measures described in the DOH *K-12 Guidance* and implement recommended, in addition to required, control measures by staff and students. Cooperation with the health department by parents and staff in case and contact interviews is also critical to being able to maintain school operations.

Controlling Outbreaks

In addition to excluding cases and their identified close contacts from school while potentially infectious, sometimes classrooms or schools may need to close temporarily to control an outbreak. When cases and outbreaks occur, public health works with schools to review and enhance mitigation/infection control measures to reduce the risk of new outbreaks.

Greg Stern MD, Health Officer

Attachment: Appendix – Requirements and References re: COVID-19 and School Operations/Planning

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REQUIREMENTS

Proclamation 20-09.3 – Phased Reopening of K-12 Schools (12/16/20)
https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/proclamations/proc_20-09.3.pdf

K-12 Schools 2020-2021 Guidance (DOH, 12/16/20)
https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/FallGuidanceK-12.pdf

School Employer Health and Safety Requirements (DOH/OSPI/L&I, 9/30/20),
https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/communications/Employer-Health-and-Safety-Requirements-for-School-Scenarios.pdf

Return to Play Guidelines (WIAA, 10/6/20)
http://wiaa.com/ConDocs/Con1911/Return-To-Play%20Guidelines.pdf

REFERENCES

Tools to Prepare for Provision of In-Person Learning among K-12 Students at Public and Private Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic (DOH, 12/16/20)
https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/DecisionTree-K12schools.pdf

WA COVID-19 Risk Assessment Dashboard
https://coronavirus.wa.gov/what-you-need-know/covid-19-risk-assessment-dashboard

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