



May 18, 2021

Dear Whatcom County School Superintendents,

On April 5, 2021 I last wrote to you regarding new [CDC](#) and [DOH guidance](#) changing the minimum distancing between students in most classroom settings from six feet to at least three feet when other layered prevention measures are in place. At that time, the Whatcom County 14-day case rate was 114, markedly reduced from the post-holiday surge in January.

On May 13, DOH issued a revision to its school guidelines, [K-12 COVID-19 Requirements for Summer 2021 and the 2021-2022 School Year](#). The new DOH document requires that schools follow the three-foot classroom distancing recommendations (six feet elsewhere) when feasible, but states that physical distancing recommendations should not prevent full-time in-person learning in the Fall. The mandatory measures that schools must take are detailed in *the K-12 Requirements* and include face coverings, ventilation, cleaning and disinfecting, and details of how schools will respond to cases of COVID19 and meet the reporting requirements to public health.

Recently, 14-day case rates in Whatcom County have exceeded 200, plateauing at 225-230, as other counties in the region that peaked earlier have seen rates dropping. Hospitalization rates also rose, peaking about two weeks ago. Despite the recent and previous even higher peaks in cases and hospitalizations, schools have been re-opened in Whatcom County since this past Fall, some with full-time in-person learning throughout that time, and transmission within schools has been rare. Almost all transmission has been associated with household, social, and extracurricular activities, and further transmission has been controlled with isolation of cases, quarantine of close contacts, and short term closures of affected classrooms or schools as needed, without generalized roll-back of school operations. As vaccine access and coverage has expanded, case rates and severity of illness among those who have been vaccinated have markedly decreased. With the FDA authorization of the Pfizer vaccine for children 12-15 years-old on May 10, 2021, we anticipate further reduction in cases and transmission risks among secondary school-aged students.

We have evidence that schools have been able to operate safely using current prevention measures despite elevated community infection rates and subsequent cases among staff and students. Considering the benefits of in-person instruction on education and development, the negative impact on development and well-being from restrictions on in-person learning, and the recent trends in COVID-19 infection rates and vaccination rates in Whatcom County, I recommend continuation of current instructional and support operations.



As I wrote in my last letter, the CDC notes that 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.” Short of closing or rolling back operations, schools can enhance prevention and response to COVID-19 by implementing the requirements and additional recommendations described in the CDC [Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools through Phased Prevention](#)

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.

Thanks for your partnership in keeping staff and students safe while providing the critical instruction and support our children need for their wellbeing, development, and success.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Greg Stern MD". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped "G" and "S".

Greg Stern MD, Health Officer

References:

K-12 Schools 2020-2021 Guidance (DOH, updated 5/25/21)

<https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/FallGuidanceK-12.pdf>

K-12 COVID-19 Requirements for Summer 2021 and the 2021-2022 School Year (DOH, 5/13/21)

<https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/820-105-K12Schools2021-2022.pdf>

Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools through Phased Prevention (CDC, updated 5/15/21)

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/operation-strategy.html>