



January 14, 2022

Dear Whatcom County K-12 School Superintendents,

The significant societal impacts of widespread COVID-19 caused by the highly infectious Omicron variant prompted a shift in public health guidance related to COVID-19 infection and exposure. In late December, 2021, the CDC shortened the periods of isolation and quarantine for the general population. These changes attempt to limit exposure when people are most likely to be contagious while also supporting people's ability to learn in-person and to work. The shorter time periods are justified based on the widespread availability of vaccines, the evidence that most transmission occurs early during SARS-CoV-2 infection, and that the incubation period of the Omicron variant may be shorter than prior variants.

The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) and the Whatcom County Health Department (WCHD) are working to align state and local guidance with the CDC updates. On January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the DOH K-12 Requirements were updated. The intent of this letter is to provide context for the changes and to clarify application of the guidance in Whatcom County. Some significant updates are highlighted below:

- Isolation and quarantine periods now allow many people to return to school on day 6 after COVID-19 infection or after exposure to someone with COVID-19 with additional precautions taken until day 10.
- Testing is not currently required at the end of 5 days of isolation after COVID-19 infection. To minimize the risk of transmission due to the shortened isolation period, a key component is to ensure those returning to school at day 6 after COVID-19 infection are asymptomatic or have minimal, resolving symptoms.
- A negative viral test is required at the end of 5 days of quarantine for exposed contacts.
- A modified quarantine option used by some schools is the DOH Test to Stay program, which enables asymptomatic students to stay in school during quarantine if they have repeated negative viral tests. In applicable schools, this program may now be expanded to students or staff with exposures that occur outside of school.
  - One variation that WCHD requires locally is that students or staff subject to quarantine who are household contacts to a COVID-19 case need to remain at home during the time they are in contact with infectious case(s) in the household (i.e. during the case(s) isolation period). Contacts will then be eligible for Test to Stay after the date of last exposure to an infectious case as long as the contact has a negative test at that point and remains asymptomatic.

Given the degree of disease spread, this updated guidance is intended to support the capacity to staff schools and to maximize in-person learning with the associated benefits for the well-being of children. While it may seem counterintuitive to implement these changes during the Omicron surge, evidence



shows that children attending school in-person may have lower transmission rates than their surrounding communities. During the Delta variant surge, studies indicated that ongoing spread of COVID-19 was uncommon in schools that consistently implemented prevention measures.

Prevention measures to slow the spread of disease remain absolutely essential. Although hospitalization risk is lower with Omicron than with Delta, the overall number of hospitalized people is higher due to the vast number of infections. Our own local hospital has been operating at over 100% capacity for a number of weeks due to the number of COVID-19 patients. The situation is similar throughout the state and is exacerbated by healthcare worker illnesses and staff shortages.

Please continue to ensure adherence to prevention measures, including the following:

- Support vaccination and booster doses for eligible students and staff. In Washington state, the most recent data shows unvaccinated people are 8-11 times more likely to be hospitalized than fully vaccinated people.
- Staff and students with symptoms should stay home and get tested for COVID-19.
- Ensure universal masking with well-fitting masks of the highest quality available; masking is required for all attendees at indoor school events, such as sporting activities.
- Maintain physical distancing to the degree possible and avoid unnecessary gatherings.

As you and your staff have worked tirelessly over the past two years to minimize transmission occurring within K-12 schools, we acknowledge the change in circumstances and in public health guidance requires significant adjustment for you and the families your districts serve. In Whatcom County, current rates of infection are more than 4 times higher than prior peak rates and are still climbing. A large number of cases are expected to be introduced into schools due to extraordinarily high levels of transmission within our communities. Though this is a significant challenge, we recognize the safety and value of in-person school and support educators' commitment to continuing in-person learning. If necessary, decisions around remote learning for small cohorts or individual schools will be made collaboratively by health and education authorities. As a community, we ask that we all work together to mitigate COVID transmission and continue to provide a healthy environment for children.

Thank you for your continued partnership.



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