



**Yakima Health District**  
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September 25, 2020

Dear Yakima County School Administrators,

The Yakima Health District (YHD) has been monitoring COVID-19 disease activity throughout the county closely since the beginning of the pandemic. Disease activity, as indicated by new cases/100,000 population over 14 days, has been decreasing over the past three months, as have hospitalization and death rates from COVID-19.

On August 4<sup>th</sup> we gave a recommendation for distance learning only, with exceptions for small group instruction to support the most educationally at-risk students. At that time, our case rate was over 370/100,000 population over 14 days, and our hospitalizations remained at almost 30 COVID-19 cases daily.

As of 9/24/20, the past three weeks of case rates have stabilized between 95-115 cases/100,000 population over 14 days, and hospitalization rates for COVID-19 across the county have also remained stable between 9-14 cases daily. There are several communities within Yakima County that have remained below the 75 cases/100,000/14-day benchmark recommended by the Washington State Department of Health (WA DOH) for in-person hybrid learning.

This sustained reduction of cases and hospitalizations is encouraging in light of the recent Labor Day holiday, as well as the addition of several activities in our modified Phase One of the Safe Start Plan and reflects a decrease of COVID-19 transmission in our county. Increased compliance with individual COVID-19 mitigation measures, including masking in public places and maintaining social distance, demonstrates an ongoing commitment to individual and community responsibility for reducing the spread of COVID-19 in our area. COVID-19 is still a significant concern throughout the county, and it is necessary to maintain vigilance with infection control and mitigation measures. However, *cautious advancement of in-person learning is not expected to pose a significantly greater risk to staff and students than their current activities*. Medically fragile and high-risk individuals are still recommended to work and learn remotely when feasible, and distance learning must continue to be offered to those families judging the risks of in-person learning to outweigh the benefits.

Based on current data through September 24<sup>th</sup>, the YHD recommends that superintendents and school boards consider:

- Advancing in-person learning for grades K-5 as early as October 12<sup>th</sup> pending ongoing stable case counts and hospitalization rates. Schools must observe all safety recommendations including cohorting students, ensuring daily health screenings are completed, managing masking requirements, enforcing handwashing, providing for and enforcing social distancing requirements, ensuring proper disinfection, and consulting with YHD regarding any known or suspected COVID-19 in students or staff. *Remote learning options must be provided to those families preferring this option.*

- Advancing hybrid learning for grades 6-8 as early as November 2<sup>nd</sup> (minimum of 3 weeks from reopening of K-5) pending ongoing stable case counts and hospitalization rates and observing all safety recommendations above.
- Advancing hybrid learning for grades 9-12 as early as November 23<sup>rd</sup> (minimum of 3 weeks from reopening of grades 6-8) pending ongoing stable case counts and hospitalization rates and observing all safety recommendations above.
- Consulting with YHD on safe advancement of in-person learning for districts with grade alignments that vary from the format above (i.e. K-6 elementary or an 8-9 junior high).

The YHD will continue to monitor COVID-19 rates between now and these proposed start dates to ensure that in-person education remains safe for our county, however COVID-19 transmission in Yakima County and our collective safety remain dependent on strict individual and community adherence to COVID-19 protocols, including use of face coverings, social distancing, isolating and testing when ill, and quarantining and testing when exposed to COVID-19. It is also important now more than ever that families keep students home when ill with *any* infection to simultaneously care for the student and avoid additional disruption to classrooms, and that employers and the community continue to support our working parents.

Implementation of in-person learning models will require significant preparation for both schools and families:

- Schools must consider the proportion of their staff and student population at higher risk for serious illness with COVID-19.
- Schools need to ensure that adequate hygiene, sanitization, and personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies are available and that the minimum of 36 square feet of space per student in classrooms can be met.
- Schools need to ensure that adequate staff are available to perform the required COVID-19 precautions, which may include daily health screenings, monitoring traffic flow and physical distancing measures, as well as identification and isolation of staff or students who may develop symptoms of COVID-19 while on school campus.
- Families need to ensure that their students' immunizations are updated, all necessary paperwork is completed, and those who require Individual Health Plans (IHP) have submitted them prior to returning to in-person learning.

### **Rationale:**

COVID-19 is a novel disease and understanding of the disease process has developed over time. Ongoing research across the globe and a growing body of data from cases has resulted in the evolution in recommendations to remain current with best practices and updated evidence. Measures implemented or recommended in the spring, or even earlier in the summer may no longer be relevant or appropriate.

Washington State Department of Health guidelines recommend distance learning until COVID-19 disease activity is at a moderate level, defined as 25-75 cases/100,000 population over 14 days. These same guidelines recommend consideration of other local factors. The Center for Disease Control and Injury Prevention provides more nuanced guidelines for school reopening detailing these local factors such as COVID-19 test positivity, hospital and ICU capacity, stability of case counts, and the ability of schools to implement mitigation strategies. While current case counts place Yakima County in the category of higher (not highest) risk for transmission, many other factors to consider, place our County in moderate risk categories.

It is clear that students benefit from education, and that for most families, distance learning is not superior or equal to in-person classroom instruction. Schools also provide many other benefits, which

are magnified for populations experiencing health disparities, and these additional benefits to in-person school attendance must also be considered in this decision-making process. Education is a key driver for health. Groups at higher risk for health disparities overlap groups at higher risk for lack of educational attainment. Barriers to educational attainment, including lack of access to early educational support, will result in lower academic achievement as well as lower lifetime health potential. Schools are also a source for nutrition, for monitoring the well-being of children, and for supporting social and emotional development.

Additionally, due to efficient and reliable contact tracing procedures for school-aged individuals, the YHD has the capacity to identify close contacts of positive cases in our schools and to intervene quickly to notify impacted individuals and groups. We have worked diligently over the past months to partner with schools in preparing safe reopening plans, and to prepare staff to respond to positive cases in students and staff. We anticipate that it should only become necessary to close schools and revert to distance learning if outbreaks occur within schools themselves or should community transmission reach a rate requiring a return to previous social distancing restrictions including distance learning.

In Washington State, local health officers have authority and responsibility to make public health decisions involving their respective local health jurisdictions. It is our recommendation that we capitalize on the collective achievements we have made in reducing and stabilizing case counts and take this opportunity to take measured steps forward towards in-person education. The YHD's recommendation is consistent with the intent of the current guidelines outlined by the State Department of Health and continues to align with state policy and guidance. The YHD will continue to monitor COVID-19 disease activity and trends closely for significant, unexpected variations and for any potential increases, including close monitoring of cases in school-aged children and school staff. SARS-CoV-2 is an emerging and novel infection, so it is important to recognize that recommendations may change, as they must be based both on best available evidence and on current disease activity.

In service,



Teresa Everson, MD, MPH  
Health Officer, Yakima Health District

*\*Language for this letter is modeled from Benton-Franklin Health District's guidance letter dated September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020*

References:

Washington State Department of Health K-12 Schools Fall 2020-2021 Guidance:

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

CDC indicators and thresholds for risk of introduction and transmission of COVID-19 in schools:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/indicators.html#thresholds>

Decision Tree for Provision of In Person Learning for K-12 Students at Public and Private Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic:

<https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/DecisionTree-K12schools.pdf>

National Academies of Medicine, Science and Engineering Schools Should Prioritize reopening in Fall 2020, Especially for Grades K-5, While Weighing Risks and Benefits:

<https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/2020/07/schools-should-prioritize-reopening-in-fall-2020-especially-for-grades-k-5-while-weighing-risks-and-benefits>

Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Reopening Washington Schools 2020 District Planning Guide:

<https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/workgroups/Reopening%20Washington%20Schools%202020%20Planning%20Guide.pdf>