



**Yakima Health District**  
1210 Ahtanum Ridge Drive  
Union Gap, WA 98903  
Phone (509) 249-6538  
Fax (509) 249-6605  
[www.yakimapublichealth.org](http://www.yakimapublichealth.org)

February 2, 2021

Dear Yakima County School Administrators,

The Yakima Health District (YHD) has been monitoring COVID-19 disease activity throughout the county closely. Yakima County disease activity peaked on January 10, 2021 at 1,167 cases per 100,000. Disease activity as indicated by new cases/100,000 population over 14 days and hospital stays has been decreasing over the past three weeks. As of February 1, 2021, the rate was 588 per 100,000.

The metrics alone do not support a return to in-person learning, per the Washington State Department of Health guidelines. However, the combination of strict masking and social distancing policies, an efficient outbreak response team and case investigation team at the Yakima Health District, and a history of successful local practices does indicate the possibility of a safe return to in-person learning. COVID-19 continues to pose a significant risk to our community, and as such the Yakima Health District will not support a full return to in-person learning.

Given the significant effect remote learning has had on families, parents, and educators, we must look at alternatives. One alternative is hybrid learning. Hybrid learning will allow schools to effectively group or “pod” students to provide health screenings, manage mask requirements, handwashing protocols, and provide for and enforce social distancing requirements. Advancing to the hybrid learning model is not expected to pose a significantly greater risk to staff and students than their current activities given local data from August 2020 among K-8 students. During this time, there were 272 students and staff who tested positive for COVID-19 while infectious at school. Of those, only 13 were found to have been acquired from on-site transmission.

**Based on this information, the Yakima Health District recommends that high schools within Yakima County develop plans for phased in implementation of hybrid learning to start as early as February 16, 2021.**

Strict adherence to COVID-19 protocols, according to state and local guidance, including use of face coverings and physical/social distancing will be necessary to ensure that students and staff are able to return safely. A phased re-entry of students during transition to in-person hybrid learning is **strongly** recommended. A phased approach of a minimum of 3 weeks between phases will allow for sufficient time to identify any major outbreaks at schools and subsequent analysis for how to prevent in the future. Given the variety across school districts, each phase will be determined by individual school districts. The following should be considered by all school administrators:

- Schools need to 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.
- 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.

- Schools must ensure that families are aware that all students' immunizations are updated, all necessary paperwork is completed, and those who require Individual Health Plans (IHP) have submitted them prior to returning to hybrid learning.
- Schools must have partnerships in place to allow for voluntary COVID-19 testing of all staff prior to returning to hybrid learning and must allow for voluntary COVID-19 testing of staff throughout the remainder of the school year.
- Schools must schedule pre-opening visits by the Yakima Health District for all high schools prior to opening.
- Schools will be subject to ongoing site visits by the Yakima Health District to ensure compliance with all state and local guidance.
- **Any class that is found to have two or more epi-linked cases<sup>1</sup> within a two-week period will be asked to close.**
- **Any school that is found to be negligent in failure to enforce the guidelines as outlined in state and local guidance will be immediately asked to close.**

As we have seen in many of our workplaces, it is not only the environment within the school or place of work that facilitates the spread of COVID-19, people gathering outside of their place of work or school, in environments with less structure, is where COVID-19 spreads. COVID-19 is still a major concern throughout the county and Yakima County continues to have one of the highest rates of COVID-19 across the state. It is necessary to maintain vigilance with infection control and mitigation measures, otherwise, large amounts of community spread will eventually find its way into our schools and workplaces.

#### **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 an evolution in recommendations to remain current with best practices and updated evidence. The Washington State Department of Health guidelines recommend distance learning for high school students until COVID-19 disease activity is at a moderate level, which is defined as below 200 cases per 100,000 over 14 days. The guidelines also recommend consideration of other local factors. In Washington State, local health officers have additional authority to make public health decisions involving their respective local health jurisdictions.

Given the quantitative and qualitative data within the community, we know that many students are not excelling within the virtual learning model. While a move to virtual learning was necessary, we have since been able to learn how to effectively reduce the risk of the spread of the disease. We have seen these measures work in many schools across the county. We know that many students are not only experiencing worsening academic performance, but their social emotional development has been stunted, and there has been an increase in reports of suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, and general hopelessness.

We cannot continue to allow our students to become increasingly disengaged with their educational attainment. We cannot continue to allow some of the students to suffer due to inequities such as access to Wi-Fi, accessibility of a breakfast and lunch, and the inability to benefit from the structure that a school day provides. Schools are a source for nutrition, for monitoring the well-being of children, and for supporting social and emotional development. While schools are doing the best they can to continue to serve the students and families, we know it is not as accessible as in-person learning will provide.

---

<sup>1</sup> **Epidemiological (Epi) Link:** Characteristic that links two cases, such as close contact between two people or a common exposure.

Specifically, in Yakima County, the Yakima Health District believes that there are several unique circumstances that will help reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread at schools.

- Yakima County school districts have demonstrated in-depth plans for a safe return to in-person learning that highlight strict mask policies, social distancing, ample hand washing opportunities, quick identification of close contacts and testing.
- Frequent communication between the Yakima Health District, the school superintendents, and the school nurses.
- Yakima Health District's efficient and reliable contact tracing procedures to identify close contacts of positive cases
- Yakima Health District's ability to double the capacity of the Outbreak Response Team to quickly respond to potential outbreaks.
- A history of working with school districts who have successfully implemented hybrid learning models without significantly increasing disease activity within the schools.

The Yakima Health District will continue to monitor COVID-19 disease activity and trends closely for significant, unexpected variations for any potential increase. SARS-CoV-2 is an emerging and novel infection, so it is important to recognize that recommendations may change as they must be rooted in best available evidence and the status of disease activity in the future. We anticipate that it should only become necessary to close schools (or resume remote learning for all students) if outbreaks occur within the schools themselves or should community transmission reach a rate requiring a community stay at home order.

There is no situation, outside of complete isolation at home, that will eliminate the risk of COVID-19 risk transmission entirely. There will always be a level of risk for COVID-19 exposure while out in public. This is why each family will need to make their own decision about whether or not to return their students back to in-person learning. Every family member will have the option to keep their students at home and continue in virtual learning.



Sincerely,  
Larry Jecha, M.D./MPH  
Interim Health Officer, Yakima Health District