



August 4, 2020

Dear Whatcom County School Superintendents:

Based on the COVID-19 disease activity in Whatcom County and our region, I do not feel it is safe to open schools in September for traditional classroom learning. I expect that our current infection rate and its ongoing increase will not slow or reverse enough to allow for safe operations this fall. Given the situation and the lead time needed to prepare for school operations, I strongly recommend against preparing to offer in-class instruction and that instead, you prepare for remote learning and provision of support services in the absence of classroom teaching.

The incidence of newly reported COVID-19 cases continues to rise in Whatcom County. After the first wave of infections that peaked at the end of March, the rate of new infections dropped to 16 confirmed cases in 14 days per 100,000 persons, a level that allowed our successful movement to Phase 2 in the Washington Safe Start plan. Since then, in addition to a surge in cases after Memorial Day, we have seen a steady rise in the baseline rate to the current 60 cases in 14 days per 100,000, and the trajectory shows that this rise is likely to continue. We have seen an increasing average number of contacts for each case, further contributing to the rate of spread. Unless there is more widespread adoption of measures by individuals, organizations, and businesses to reduce transmission, we will not soon see a reversal of the upward trajectory.

We share the goal with the public and our education community of returning to in-person instruction for all of our students. We recognize the importance of classroom teaching and activities for the education and development of children, the emotional and social benefits, as well as the support services schools provide. However, in order for that return to be sustainable and not contribute to transmission of COVID-19 within schools and our community, reopening classrooms requires sustained and low rates of infection in the community, effective measures in schools to suppress transmission, and quick and effective response to cases as they occur.

Although children are less likely to have severe disease than adults, and younger children are less likely to become infected or transmit infection than older children and adults, this does occur, and children over 10 years of age are as efficient in transmitting infection as adults. High rates of infection in the community increase the risk of infection spreading within the school, and transmission in the school can accelerate rise of infection rates in the community.

New infections among staff or students will impose considerable demands and instability on school operations as cases who are isolated and their close contacts who are quarantined are excluded from school until they no longer pose a risk of spreading infection to others. Further transmission outside of the schools will impact health, economic, and social activities, countering our efforts to sustain our economy during this pandemic and to maintain access to critical medical care.



The situation is likely to change, and as we gain more information about COVID-19 disease and transmission, guidelines are likely to be more refined. I encourage you to continue to plan for eventual hybrid and in-class instruction should the situation and guidelines allow for safe return to more normal operations. Whatcom County Health Department will continue to work with our state and local public health and educational partners in planning and developing guidelines, in maintaining ongoing communication and collaboration with our local school districts to successfully provide a safe and sustainable transition to in-person learning.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Greg Stern MD". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Greg Stern MD, Health Officer