



COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

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## PUBLIC HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT

November 6, 2020

Schelli Slaughter, MHA  
Director

Dimyana Abdelmalek, MD, MPH  
Health Officer

Dear Thurston County Superintendents and Heads of Schools,

In my last letter, I relayed Thurston County had crossed into the high transmission range on October 23, 2020, on the [Governor's Risk Assessment Dashboard](#). At that time, I informed you I would be checking our transmission rates daily for 14 days and if we remained in the high transmission zone for a majority of those days, I would recommend a return to remote learning with the exception of small cohorts, prioritizing students with the greatest needs as per the [K-12 decision tree guidelines](#).

Every day for the past 14 days, Thurston County has been in the high transmission range which is greater than 75 cases per 100,000 population over 14 days. As of November 4, 2020, the transmission rate for Thurston County is 95.9 cases per 100,000 people over 14 days. In accordance with the Washington State DOH K-12 decision tree, Thurston County COVID-19 activity level is high and I am strongly recommending a return to distance learning modality until January 2021 with the exception of in-person learning opportunities for cohorts of 6 students with the highest needs. Given our rising transmission rates, I am recommending the transition from in-person hybrid learning to remote learning take place within the next two weeks.

In addition to the increase in community transmission, this recommendation is necessary in Thurston County for multiple reasons. Since our COVID-19 rate increase began, we have seen an increase in outbreaks, including several instances in educational settings as well as long-term care facilities and other places of employment. This has further exacerbated the spread of COVID-19 in our community.

Our hospitals, which hold patients from our county and neighboring counties, have seen an increase in beds filled with patients suffering from COVID-19. Our public health capacity has stretched to meet community needs with this rise in cases and outbreaks but is not infinite. The ability to keep those who work and learn in our schools safe relies on our capacity to respond swiftly to positive cases and initiate rapid contact tracing to ensure people have the information they need to keep themselves and their communities safe and prevent spread, which has been successful for small cohorts of students.

Winter months pose significant challenges. As people spend more time indoors and the weather gets colder, there is an accompanying rise in viral respiratory illnesses, increasing the likelihood transmission rates will increase.

Recent modeling has shown the importance of mitigation measures in reducing the spread of COVID-19. Our ability to reduce transmission rates to a level where it is safe for schools to resume rests on each of us doing our part to wear masks in public, stay home when we are sick, or have been instructed to isolate/quarantine, maintain physical distance of six feet or more from non-household members, avoid large gatherings, and follow proper respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene. In the event new national or state information, data, metrics, or scientific evidence becomes available, my guidance may be updated

to reflect emerging best practices to keep our students, educators, and staff safe in our schools and I will continue to use Thurston County's specific situation and transmission patterns and the current K-12 decision tree as a basis for my recommendation. My goal is for our K-12 students to return to school in a manner that is safe.

This pandemic is an unprecedented challenge and long-term health impacts of COVID-19 illness are unknown. Mitigating the spread is critical. I commend your diligent efforts in supporting our students, staff, and their families. I look forward to partnering with all of you in the months ahead to find ways to engage our students in essential learning while keeping our school communities safe.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "D Abdelmalek, MD". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Dimyana Abdelmalek, MD, MPH  
Thurston County Health Officer