

Letter to the Community: July 31, 2020

Hello Thurston County! Yesterday I made the difficult decision to recommend distance learning for both public and private K-12 schools. I made this decision in response to the rise in our case counts over the past month, with more than one hundred people a week becoming infected with COVID-19 over the past two weeks.

When you look at the trend in number of cases per week, we have not yet reached a plateau. This leads to significant risk of getting COVID-19 in the community, meaning both the people who teach and work in our schools as well as our students have a higher risk of getting COVID-19 and transmitting it to others. This decision is in agreement with the CDC, both on the importance of our schools to the lives of our students as well as leaving the decision to close schools for in-person learning to be made based on community transmission and other COVID-19 indicators at the local level.

People who work and teach in our schools are diverse in their acute risk of severe illness from COVID-19. They vary in age and have different health conditions that can put them at higher risk. While children are less likely to become seriously ill from COVID-19, some children become profoundly sick, some even experience multisystem inflammatory syndrome (MIS-C) where the brain, lungs, heart, and other organs can become inflamed. We are still learning about the long-term consequences of COVID-19 infection.

We must also keep in mind that each person who works and learns in our schools have families they go home to and can spread COVID-19 within their household, including those who are particularly vulnerable like grandparents and family members at high risk for severe disease. Our schools are not islands, they are integrated into the very heart of our community. A rise in COVID-19 cases affect all of us including the families tending to loved ones who are sick. Our demonstrated growth in cases and rate at which people are becoming infected makes it unsafe for schools to open for in-person instruction.

Ensuring it is safe to go to school before restarting in person instruction is essential to the long-term health of our community. Students benefit from so much more than a quality education when they attend school. They grow socially and emotionally. Some students depend on school for their nutritional needs. Some have special needs that are best addressed in school. We are working closely with our educational community to determine what must be in place for a safe reopening of in-person instruction. This situation is dynamic and as the situation in our community changes, I will continue to give guidance based on the best available evidence.

We know families will need to find alternative ways to care for their children and understand this will have significant impact. We are working with our community partners who provide care to children to make sure they have the guidance and recommendations needed to keep kids safe and healthy. I look forward to the day when we can safely resume all activities of public life and I know if we take precautions now, we can get there together. Using the best available science to keep our communities safe and healthy lies at the heart of my job as health officer and at the heart of everything we do.

Wishing you the best of health,

Dimyana Abdelmalek, MD, MPH