

Partnership with public health is key to reopening schools in fall

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THURSTON COUNTY -- Thurston County Superintendents and Thurston County Public Health & Social Services Department (TPHSS) officials met on July 22, 2020 to discuss the current transmission rate of COVID-19 in Thurston County and develop protocols regarding COVID-19 exposure in school settings. Officials want to share how decisions will be made if the county continues to see a rise in COVID-19 cases and Thurston County School Districts need to move to 100% remote learning.

As required by OSPI, Thurston County School Districts are planning for reopening schools in the fall. Districts must work with their local public health department to establish clear processes for communication about COVID-19 exposure as part of their reopening plan. In addition, officials discussed a recent study released by the Washington State Department of Health which indicates that a high level of community transmission of COVID-19 will impact the ability of school districts to open for some face-to-face instruction.

Top of mind for both superintendents and TCPHSS is the current transmission rate, community spread, in Thurston County. On March 20, the county transmission rate of newly diagnosed COVID-19 cases over the prior two weeks was 5.6 per 100,000 residents. On June 20 it was 15.7 per 100,000, and as of July 20 it was 51.1 per 100,000 residents.

Additionally, for the past three weeks the percentage of residents testing positive for COVID-19 has increased. Within the past week, 4.7% of county residents tested for COVID-19 were positive for the infection. This is higher than what it was in March when schools closed.

TCPHSS is working with the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) and other local health jurisdictions to determine what metrics and criteria will be used to inform decision making regarding the health and safety of offering face-to-face instruction at schools. They are also working with DOH to develop a decision-making matrix districts will use to operationalize their response to a COVID-19 exposure at a school.

Superintendents are working diligently on plans to reopen our schools safely. We appreciate the strong partnership and collaboration between Thurston County School Districts and TCPHSS. Schools closed in the spring due to the public health crisis; the goal in reopening schools is to keep the health of our students and staff as the top priority while continuing to meet the educational needs for all students.

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