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Whatcom County Health Officer revises recommendation to schools

BELLINGHAM, WA - Whatcom County Health Officer Dr. Greg Stern has revised his recommendation on the reopening of local schools. Prior recommendations, on Aug. 31 and Oct. 12, reflected cases and conditions at those times.

Yesterday, in a [letter to school administrators](#) within Whatcom County, Dr. Stern recommended that school districts pause plans for expanding in-person instruction for middle and high school students. Phasing in a return to classrooms for students in elementary school and students with special needs may continue at this time.

"The benefits of keeping students learning in-person certainly have to be weighed against the risks," Dr. Stern said, "but those risks are lower for younger students than older ones, and the benefits to them of socializing with teachers and peers are high."

The pause was recommended in response to the sharp climb in COVID-19 cases locally and the Governor's [recent restrictions and advisories](#).

"The recent increase in the rate of infections in the community challenges us to keep schools and our community safe while sustaining the progress made in assuring the best education and support for our students," said Dr. Stern.

Younger students transmit the virus less efficiently than older students and adults. Because they remain in one classroom with one set of instructors, they can be kept in small groups with limited contact with other students and staff.

Older students transmit COVID-19 as efficiently as adults, and they have multiple classes involving contact with more students and staff than elementary school students. The measures taken by schools (such as distancing, face covering, minimizing group sizes, and frequent handwashing and surface cleaning) have been effective in limiting transmission within schools, even as community rates have increased and in-person instruction has been phased in.

Despite the limited transmission within schools, because of the recent marked increase in COVID-19 cases and the Governor's recent restrictions and advisories for bringing rates down, Dr. Stern said he recommends that plans to reintroduce in-person instruction in middle and high school should be paused.

"We may need to roll back to remote learning in all middle and high schools if the community transmission rates continue to rise despite the new measures, but want to avoid the disruption of current operations for now" Dr. Stern said. "We continue to monitor the situation and consult with schools and public health agencies on the best actions to take."

Dr. Stern said that swift action taken by schools, the health department and those diagnosed with COVID-19 can keep infections from spreading further should COVID-19 infections occur among students or staff. When outbreaks occur within classrooms or schools, the Whatcom County Health Department may require temporary closures.

"When infections occur, it is critical to identify them early, and for those who are infected to isolate," said Dr. Stern. "Those who are infected, and those who have been in contact with them, should not be in school."

School districts and private schools make the final decision about their level of operations, in compliance with the Governor's most recent proclamation and the state Department of Health (DOH) decision tree for in-person learning during the pandemic.

For more information on COVID-19 response locally, visit www.whatcomcounty.us/covid or whatcomcovid.com.

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