

Children need to get back to school – It's up to our community to help make that happen

Our children need to get back to school. While it is true that some students have experienced greater success in a remote learning model, a vast majority of our Walla Walla children rely on the daily interactions, engagement and in-person learning our traditional school experience provides. In fact, for many of our most vulnerable students, school is one of the few places where they feel safe, have access to a healthy meal, receive mental health services, are provided critical special education and language supports, and find themselves surrounded by trusted, caring adults. Regrettably, as we watch our daily COVID count rise across our region, the reality of returning to in person learning continues to slip further away.

Last week I made one of the most difficult calls I have had to make in my professional career. Based on our community's rising COVID transmission rates there was no other option than to begin this fall under our remote learning program for most Walla Walla students. Recent guidance from the Washington State Department of Health recommends schools open for limited, socially-distanced instruction once case counts are below 75 cases per one hundred thousand population over a 14 day window. That equates to about 45 cases for Walla Walla County. We are now logging six times the transmission threshold to open up schools for in person learning. We need to reverse this trend in order to get students back to school, and it is up to each and every one of us to help make that happen.

We have developed a *Roadmap to Safely Reopening Schools* that identifies community health triggers necessary to begin transitioning students back safely to campus. It complies with state health guidance and can be found on our website here: <https://www.wwps.org/safely-reopening-schools>

We deeply realize that the news of beginning the year in a virtual setting will significantly impact our families and community. And while we have heeded the input from thousands of parents, students and staff in order to deliver an optimal learning experience for each and every student, childcare, delivering specialized services and coordinating schedules will not be easy.

Our learning model this fall, referred to as Comprehensive Distance Learning 2.0, will be robust. It will meet the academic and social/emotional needs of our students – it will support those with disabilities, language or learning gaps – it will be remarkably different from last spring's experience. There will be daily synchronous (live virtual instruction) with classroom teachers. There will be structure and support for parents, coupled with accountability from students, families and our staff. Students will progress, meet learning targets and be prepared for when we welcome them back safely through our schoolhouse doors.

I have asked all of my colleagues to rise to this challenge and do everything in their power to ensure their instruction is top notch, their learning plans engaging, and their outreach to students and parents comprehensive. In that same fashion, I encourage parents and our greater community to partner with us during these difficult times. We will need your support. Whether it is helping a young learner navigate their live classroom experience with their teacher, reading with your child or grandchild utilizing our free online book program we have procured, or checking in on the high school student who lives down the street to ensure they are attending their live virtual classes daily. By working together we can ensure that every student will be ready and prepared for their next grade, next course, or their future.

This work will be hard, different and discouraging at times, but we will get through this together. It is inspiring to watch the creativity, ingenuity and collaboration taking place over recent weeks from so many staff and community agencies. I am confident that when we do “return to no normal,” we will come back better than ever. We will have developed new ways of reaching students, improved our instructional utilization of technology, developed stronger bonds with parents and established better coordination with our valued partners.

Please be safe and help us return to normal by masking up, practicing good hygiene, and following the direction of our local health authority. Our kids are counting on you.