



## WALLA WALLA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY HEALTH

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314 West Main Street • Walla Walla, WA 99362

Main Telephone: (509) 524-2650 • Confidential Fax: (509) 524-2642 • Main Fax: (509) 524-2678

September 17, 2020

Dear Walla Walla County School Administrators,

Walla Walla County Department of Community Health (DCH) has been monitoring COVID-19 disease activity throughout the county closely. Disease activity as indicated by new cases/100,000 population over 14 days has been decreasing over the past month. Preliminary data as of 9/12/2020 for several communities (Waitsburg, Prescott, Touchet, and Burbank) has dipped below the 75 cases/100,000/14-day benchmark recommended by Washington State Department of Health (WA DOH) for in-person hybrid learning. Further, City of College Place disease activity has also dipped below this threshold for the first time since July.

This indicator in combination with overall sustained trend of lower disease activity is sufficient to warrant a new recommendation on hybrid learning. At this time, the overall Walla Walla County disease activity, and the City of Walla Walla, remain above the WA DOH recommendation, but rates have been steadily dropping throughout the last month. If current trends continue, it is anticipated that rates across the county will continue to drop below the DOH recommended benchmark by the middle of October.

The sustained reduction in COVID-19 disease activity, in addition to the reduction in impact on the health care system as evidenced in hospitalization rates demonstrate a reduction in COVID-19 disease burden. Increased compliance with individual COVID-19 mitigation measures, including masking in grocery stores and mandatory masking in all businesses, demonstrates advancement in individual and community responsibility for reducing the spread of COVID-19 in our area. COVID-19 is still a major concern throughout the county, and it is necessary to maintain vigilant with infection control and mitigation measures. However, advancing to the hybrid learning model is not expected to pose a significantly greater risk to staff and students than their current activities. A hybrid model permits schools to provide in-person instruction at roughly 50% capacity. This allows schools to effectively group or “pod” students to provide health screenings, manage mask requirements, handwashing protocols, and provide for and enforce social distancing requirements. Medically fragile/high risk individuals are still recommended to work or learn remotely when feasible.

Based on data through September 12<sup>th</sup> (see attached report), Walla Walla County Department of Community Health recommends that:

- All schools within Columbia, Prescott, Touchet, and Waitsburg school districts plan for implementation of in-person hybrid learning models as early as October 1, 2020.
- College Place School District plan for implementation of in-person hybrid learning models as early as October 19, 2020
- Walla Walla School District continue to monitor disease activity over the month of September to determine when in-person hybrid learning will be safe consistent with their Roadmap to Reopening Schools plan. If safe

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conditions are realized, this may allow for in-person hybrid learning for KG-2<sup>nd</sup> grade students as early as October 19, 2020.

These dates allow sufficient time to continue to monitor disease activity through the end of September to ensure that it will not escalate significantly. These dates reflect only the public health assessment of risk of COVID-19 associated with school re-opening. Strict adherence to COVID-19 protocols, according to state and local guidance, including use of face coverings and physical/social distancing will be necessary to ensure that students and staff are able to return safely. Phased re-entry of students during transition to in-person hybrid learning is recommended.

Implementation of in-person hybrid learning models will require significant preparation for both schools and families.

- Schools need to consider the proportion of their staff and student population at higher risk for serious illness with COVID-19.
- Schools need to ensure that adequate hygiene, sanitization, and personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies are available.
- Schools need to ensure that adequate staff are available to perform the required COVID-19 precautions, which may include daily health screenings, monitoring traffic flow and physical distancing measures, as well as identification and isolation of staff or students who may develop symptoms of COVID-19 while on school campus.
- Families need to ensure that their students' immunizations are updated, all necessary paperwork is completed, and those who require Individual Health Plans (IHP) have submitted them prior to returning to in-person learning

### **Rationale:**

COVID-19 is a novel disease and understanding of the disease process has developed over time. Ongoing research across the globe and a growing body of data from cases has resulted in an evolution in recommendations to remain current with best practices and updated evidence. Measures implemented or recommended in the spring, or even earlier in the summer may no longer be relevant or appropriate.

Washington State Department of Health guidelines recommended distance learning until COVID-19 disease activity was at a moderate level, defined as 25 – 75 cases/100,000 over 14 days. The guidelines also recommend consideration of other local factors. In Washington State, local health officers have additional authority to make public health decisions involving their respective local health jurisdictions.

It is clear that students benefit from education. Qualitative feedback from students and families suggests that distance learning is not superior or equal to in-person classroom instruction for most students. Schools also provide additional benefits, which are magnified for populations

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experiencing health disparities. There are benefits to in-person school attendance that must also be considered in this decision making process. Education is a key driver for health. Groups at higher risk for health disparities overlap groups at higher risk for lack of educational attainment. Barriers to educational attainment, including lack of access to early educational support, will result in lower academic achievement as well as lower health potential. Schools are also a source for nutrition, for monitoring the well-being of children, and for supporting social and emotional development.

Additionally, due to efficient and reliable contact tracing procedures Walla Walla County Department of Community Health has the capacity to identify the close contacts of positive cases. This will allow the Department to intervene quickly to notify impacted area businesses and schools. We anticipate that it should only become necessary to close schools (or send into remote learning) if outbreaks occur within the schools themselves or should community transmission reach a rate requiring a community stay at home order.

DCH's recommendation is consistent with the intent of the current guidelines outlined by the State Department of Health and continues to align with state policy and guidance. The DCH will continue to monitor COVID-19 disease activity and trends closely for significant, unexpected variations and for any potential increases. SARS-CoV-2 is an emerging and novel infection, so it is important to recognize that recommendations may change as they must be rooted in best available evidence and in the status of disease activity in the future.

Sincerely,

Larry Jecha, M.D./MPH  
Health Officer, Walla Walla County

*\*Language for this letter is modeled off of Benton Franklin Health District's guidance letter dated September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020.*