



Skamania County Community Health
710 SW Rock Creek Drive
Stevenson, WA 98648

8/5/20

Skamania County School Superintendents,

The state of Washington, Skamania County and its surrounding region have seen an increase in COVID-19 activity in the last several weeks. As the school year approaches, we understand the need for school districts to quickly make decisions regarding safety of in-person instruction for their students and staff.

A report released July 13, 2020 from the Institute of Disease Modeling noted that under certain circumstances in-person instruction even with safeguards in place risks significantly worsening the rate of COVID-19 transmission in the community. This could have substantial impacts on the health of a community as a whole and make holding in-person school less safe. The report predicts that if disease transmission is at a low enough level, and if social mobility is reduced, schools can hold in-person classes with safety measures in place (masking, distancing, cohorting classes and symptom screening among others). The [CDC's guidance](#) on re-opening schools also notes that "the best available evidence from countries that have opened schools indicates that COVID-19 poses low risks to school-aged children, **at least in areas with low community transmission**" (emphasis added).

On August 5th, Governor Inslee and the Washington Department of Health (DOH) released a [decision tree for schools](#), which outlines different levels of disease transmission within the community and recommendations based on those levels. Less than 25 cases/100K population/14 days is considered low activity, 25-75 cases/100K/14 days is considered moderate, and greater than 75 cases/100K/14 days is considered high. Looking at the 14-day window from July 16th to July 29th, Skamania county has had a rate of 82.9 cases/100k/14 days putting the county at high COVID-19 activity level. DOH strongly recommends distance learning for most students at this level.

We all want our children to go back to school, as the benefits for students and families are obvious. However, with the current disease burden in Skamania County we recommend *at this time* that most school districts in the county start the school year with distance learning and continually re-evaluate conditions. Our concern is that with high community transmission, the risk of outbreaks in schools is elevated, which could lead to schools closing again quickly. We have some indications that rates of new infections have started to slow in Skamania County, if this trend continues, we are optimistic that conditions for having in-person school will be safer soon.

Some school districts with smaller numbers of students and facilities with an excess of physical space to incorporate physical distancing may be able to offer limited in person instruction or a hybrid model, if the administration feels comfortable that their safety

measures can be strictly adhered to. If this is considered, we would recommend prioritizing K-5 grades and at-risk groups for in-person learning.

Our current situation emphasizes that if we want to prioritize children and allow them to safely return to school, our community must be more vigilant in slowing the spread of COVID-19 by maintaining safe practices at work, avoiding social gatherings with those outside your household and consistently wearing cloth masks in public spaces. We are hopeful that we can turn the corner on this recent increase in COVID-19 activity and allow children and staff to safely return to in-person school as quickly as possible.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Krager". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'S' and 'K'.

Steven Krager, MD MPH
Deputy Health Officer, Skamania County