



August 3, 2020

Dear Lewis County School Superintendents:

As Lewis County Health Officer, pursuant to the authority granted by the legislature in RCW 70.05.070(3), in order to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19 within my jurisdiction, at this time I strongly urge and recommend all K-12 schools to remain closed to in-person general instruction for the start of the 2020 school year.

Based on the COVID-19 disease activity in Lewis County and our region, I do not feel it is safe to open schools in September for traditional classroom learning. Therefore, I recommend all public and private schools offering classes in Lewis County in the K-12 range to remain closed to in-person general instruction for the 2020 Fall term, and for districts to utilize distance learning modalities. Failure to comply with this recommendation may require stronger restrictions in the future up to and including mandatory closure.

COVID-19 affects all ages in every geographic area of our county. Our positive case numbers continue to increase with no flattening of the curve in sight. During the six week period our county has been in Phase 3, the number of our fellow county residents who tested positive for COVID-19 has increased more than three-fold from 49 to 185.

Lewis County currently meets none of the state benchmarks for stopping COVID-19. Our 14-day total rate is now 58.6 cases per 100,000 population, more than twice the state's target of 25. Our average is 29.8 persons tested for every positive, far below the 50-person state benchmark. As of this writing, 3.1 percent of all Lewis County residents tested show a positive result, which is higher than the state's 2 percent benchmark.

A report released July 13, 2020 from the Institute of Disease Modeling noted that even with safeguards in place, in-person instruction can put our children and our communities at risk of worsening the rate of COVID-19 transmission.

On July 29, 2020 the Journal of the American Medical Association published results of a U.S. population-based study that concluded school closures were associated with a significant decrease COVID-19 incidence (-62%) and mortality (-58%). The study was conducted between March and May 2020 when the incidence of COVID-19 was much lower than now.

These results suggest to me that keeping schools closed to in-person learning makes even more sense when the incidence of COVID-19 is much higher.

This study also states that some of the reductions in virus spread and deaths, “may have been related to other concurrent non-pharmaceutical interventions.” That means community members wearing masks, practicing social distancing, washing their hands, and following other measures that we know reduce community transmission.

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 Lewis County, I recommend starting the school year with distance learning and then re-evaluate the conditions monthly.

If school districts believe they must provide in-person instruction to meet the needs of students with disabilities, English language learners, migrant or homeless students, or state or federal requirements, there may be options for safely providing limited in-person instruction for cohorts of 5 or less. If considering any such plans I implore you to closely follow all guidelines developed by OSPI and the State Department of Health.

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.

This is an unprecedented time, and it is important for us to all work together to stop the spread of COVID-19. Keeping our students and educational and support staff healthy is essential to the health of our county.

We are hopeful that we can turn the corner on COVID-19 transmission and allow children and staff to safely return to in-person school as quickly as possible. I look forward to working with each of you to reduce transmission rates to a level where a safe return to public life is possible.

Sincerely,

Rachel Wood, M.D., MPH  
Lewis County Health Officer

