



## Cowlitz County Health & Human Services Departments

1952 9th Avenue  
Longview, WA 98632  
TEL (360) 414-5599  
FAX (360) 425-7531  
[www.co.cowlitz.wa.us/hhs](http://www.co.cowlitz.wa.us/hhs)

### Board of County Commissioners

Arne Mortensen	District 1
Dennis Weber	District 2
Joe Gardner	District 3

July 31st, 2020

Cowlitz County School Superintendents,

The state of Washington, Cowlitz 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).

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 Cowlitz County we recommend *at this time* that 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 flatten in Cowlitz County, if this trend continues, we are optimistic that conditions for having in-person school will be safer soon.

Some school districts with groups of small 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 strongly recommend prioritizing K-5 grades and at-risk groups for in-person learning with older grades practicing distance 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'.

Steve Krager, MD, MPH

Cowlitz County Deputy Health Officer

[Steven.krager@clark.wa.gov](mailto:Steven.krager@clark.wa.gov)