



# MEDIA RELEASE

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## **Yakima Health District Recommends Hybrid Learning for High School Students**

**Yakima, WA**—On November 15, 2020 the Yakima Health District recommended a halt in resuming in-person learning for high school students due to an increase of COVID-19 in the community. Since then, many schools have resumed some form of in-person learning with students K-12 with great success. Throughout this school year, a total of 272 staff and students have been infectious with COVID-19 while at schools. Of those 272, only 13 were believed to have been infected while at school. Even as Yakima County peaked at 1,167 cases per 100,000, there was not a significant increase in on-site school transmission.

Washington State Department of Health guidelines do not recommend hybrid learning for high school students until there is a rate of 200 per 100,000. However, in Yakima County the Yakima Health District has been working very closely with school administrators to develop a strategy that will ensure a safe return of students to hybrid learning. Given the rate of 588 per 100,000, the Yakima Health District does not recommend a full return to in-person learning at this time.

On February 1, 2021 the Yakima Health District staff and some Board of Health members met with superintendents from across Yakima County to review their plans for introducing the hybrid learning model for high school students. In this meeting, superintendents shared the data available, as well as qualitative experiences from teachers and families. In addition to hearing from the superintendents, the Yakima Health District has engaged with superintendents and school nurses on a weekly basis since August 2020. The Yakima Health District met to review its capacity for case investigation and outbreak response. After discussing all the available information and resources, the Yakima Health District has decided to support hybrid learning for all high school students in Yakima County **as soon as February 16, 2021.**

The guidelines that must be followed by all school administrators prior to opening can be found in a letter written by Interim Health Officer Dr. Larry Jecha. This letter can be found on the Yakima Health District [website](#). Within the letter, it is stated that:

- Schools must have partnerships in place to allow for voluntary COVID-19 testing of all staff prior to returning to hybrid learning.
- Schools must schedule pre-opening visits by the Yakima Health District for all high schools prior to opening.
- Schools will be subject to ongoing site visits by the Yakima Health Districts to ensure compliance with all state and local guidance.
- **Any class that is found to have two or more epi-linked cases<sup>1</sup> within a two-week period will be asked to close.**

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<sup>1</sup> **Epidemiological (Epi) Link:** Characteristic that links two cases, such as close contact between two people or a common exposure.



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- **Any school that is found to be negligent in failure to enforce the guidelines as outlined in state and local guidance will be immediately asked to close.**

To summarize, the reasons that hybrid learning is being recommended for high school students despite high community case counts are:

1. Yakima County's demonstrated success of in-person learning as measured by rates of on-site COVID-19 activity at schools.
2. Yakima County superintendent's strength of return to in-person learning plans.
3. Close and frequent communication between the Yakima Health District, the school superintendents, and the school nurses to ensure all state and local recommendations are being followed.
4. Yakima Health District's efficient contact tracing and the ability to double their capacity of their Outbreak Response Team to quickly respond to potential outbreaks.

A press conference with more information will take place on February 3, 2020 at 11:00am. A media advisory with additional information will be sent out later today.

## **QUOTES:**

“Given the success that has been observed locally, and given the severe impact being observed, the benefit of returning students to school outweighs the risk at this point in time. This is all dependent on schools following the state and local safety protocols and on family members following the public health recommendations. If we want schools to stay open, we will have to ensure to slow the spread of COVID-19, before it causes outbreaks at the schools or other places currently operating at limited capacity.” **Dr. Jecha, Interim Health Office of the Yakima Health District**

“Though we have not seen community transmission rates significantly increase COVID-19 spread in schools, that does not mean we can stop following the public health recommendations. The responsibility for keeping schools open is also a community responsibility. Families must ensure they do not send their children to school if they are not feeling well. Schools must ensure that COVID-19 safety policies are being strictly followed. Students and teachers must ensure they are not engaging in high-risk activities such as large or small social gatherings outside of school. To keep schools open, we need to maintain a safe environment for all.” **Andre Fresco, Executive Director, Yakima Health District**

"As area school districts we continue to appreciate the partnership we have with the Yakima Health District. Both parties have worked extremely hard to keep our communities safe and recognize the importance of in-person schooling. We all take both the physical and mental health of students and staff seriously. As school districts we are ready, have stringent safety protocols in place and believe that this is a productive next step at getting our students back in school." **Shane Backlund, Superintendent, Selah School District**

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“Since last October and November, staff at our elementary and middle schools have been working in-person with students and have been doing so safely, thanks to the protocols that we have in place and thanks to the diligence of all of our staff members who work with those kids. While there is understandably a little apprehension, staff at EVHS are really looking forward to having our kids back on campus, knowing that we can do so in a low-risk environment. We know that remote learning has been difficult and that our kids miss the structure and the sense of community that the school environment provides. We all believe having the kids physically in class, even if it’s only in each class twice a week, will help every student who is struggling be more successful in the second half of year. We also miss face-to-face learning and the relationships we develop with our students and can’t wait to see them.”

**Mike Duerre, High School Teacher and East Valley Education Association President**

**Additional Information:**

[WA Department of Health K-12 Guidance](#)

[Yakima County COVID-19 School Data](#)

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