August 12, 2020

Dear Grant County School Boards,

Recently, you have received our recommendations to begin the school year in Grant County with distance learning only. Joined by the fellow health officers and public health administrators from the neighboring North-Central Washington counties, we do not support full in-person education if the COVID-19 incidence rate exceeds 25/100,000/14 days. Our present rate is 442 and rising.

Public health, just like our nation at large, faces a profound social and moral dilemma: namely, how to weigh the known risks to children, families, and society of closing school buildings against the real risks of opening schools when the virus is still circulating at high levels. The impact of COVID-19 is simply not lost on us, as we witness the multitude of this virus' destructive effects on our communities every day.

The recommendations to begin the school year with distance learning is based on evolving evidence that children can acquire, carry, and spread the novel coronavirus to others and do so mirroring their community COVID rates. We believe that COVID-19 infection rates at schools cannot be disentangled from the rate observed in the communities served by those schools. What we also must consider and know fairly well is the COVID's ability to spread effectively in group settings which then gives rise to increased hospitalization, promoting deadly impact on vulnerable people.

The evidence is mounting that children play a role in spreading the virus and they too can become severely ill, even though, in a fortunate twist, most children are asymptomatic or mildly ill. Already, outbreaks of COVID from school settings are being reported from Georgia, Mississippi, Indiana, Florida, Hawaii and other locations, where schools may have opened already in some communities with incomplete COVID mitigation.

Schools are not islands and reflect their communities in many ways. Staff may not live in the community they work in, possibly commuting from communities with higher rates. Students from other locations are often admitted to neighboring districts, and so on. You have a decision to make with the understanding that public health does not support in person learning until the virus transmission rates are reduced. If you open schools too early, the risk of outbreaks, closures and undesirable outcomes will follow our community incidence rate.

As we discuss and research the big questions about when and how to safely bring our students back to school, you and the community have the power to bring the rates down. Any region experiencing high or increasing community transmission should do everything possible to lower it. If the whole community followed all public health recommendations about distancing, masking, hand washing, isolation and quarantine, death rates in any place can be lowered by 90% within 9 to 11 weeks after control measures begin. Because cases precede deaths, cases and incidence rates could be lowered in under 2 months.

Whether and how to reopen primary schools is scientific, technocratic, but also emotional and moral question. Consider this quote from a recent article in the New England Journal of Medicine: "our sense of responsibility
toward children -- at the very least, to protect them from the vicissitudes of life, including the decisions of adults who allow infections to spiral out of control -- is core to our humanity.” We all bear the responsibility for bringing the rates of COVID-19 down and should resolve to do so for the sake of our children.

GCHD will continue sharing with you our findings as we continue to learn about COVID in children and schools and as we consider these gut-wrenching decisions. There is no playbook for the decisions we face or the balance we should attempt to maintain. But at this time your state and local public health agencies must request that you do not open your buildings to in-person instruction until the disease rates are at our desired targets.

With Respect,

[Signature]
Dr. Alexander Brzezny
Grant County Health Officer

[Signature]
Theresa Adkinson
Grant County Health District Administrator

Attachment:

Grant County Daily Case Graph

Washington State COVID Incidence Graph
In-person school reopening threshold

In-Entity Rate in Grant County
Cases / 100,000 population / 14 days
Time Period: July 21 - August 10, 2020

311 296 294 314 318 289 291 319 330 326 311 333 334 343 358 343 362 396 401 416 418 442