



November 18th, 2020

Dear Benton and Franklin County School Administrators,

Returning children and adolescents to an in-person school experience is a priority for Benton-Franklin Health District; however, doing so can't run independent from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a novel virus – emergent and still relatively new – and as of yet there is no one way to determine readiness for schools. A combination of factors must be considered. This is a fluid process as disease burden fluctuates and we watch who is getting the virus, where outbreaks are occurring, where and how schools are seeing success, and the safety net schools can provide, especially for students with barriers to success at home.

We're now seeing a surge in cases at ever-increasing rates. Washington State and the United States as a whole is setting daily records for numbers of cases. Of the cases reported to BFHD, one out of seven has been within the last two weeks. Given the rapid increase of disease burden in our communities, at this time, I must amend my recommendation to Richland, Pasco, and Kennewick school districts to pause the phased return for middle and high school students.


Over this most recent two-week period, in addition to the exponential growth in disease activity, Benton and Franklin counties have experienced a worsening in the other disease metrics that the Health District follows to evaluate public health impacts of returning additional students to school.

Benton & Franklin counties, combined	Current	One month prior	Trend
Case rate/100,000/14 days	507.9 10/28 - 11/10	181.9 9/27 - 10/10	
% positive COVID-19 tests	18.2% 11/8/2020	8.1% 10/8/2020	
New cases per day (average over 14 days)	127 10/28 - 11/10	41.1e 9/27 - 10/10	

Health District Locations:

Kennewick Office:
7102 W. Okanogan Place
Kennewick, WA 99336
Phone: 509-460-4200

Pasco Office:
412 W. Clark St
Pasco, WA 99301
Phone: 509-547-9737

% of hospitalizations due to COVID-19	9.4% 11/17	7% 10/16	
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Of concern as well is the current rate of disease activity among 10 – 19 year olds, which is 3.9 times higher than the disease rate for the elementary school age children when they returned to school in-person in mid-October.

Compared to elementary schools, middle school and high school environments are higher risk environments for transmission, due to both the increased frequency of interactions between multiple groups of students, and the increased likelihood for older children and adolescents to transmit COVID-19. When community disease activity is low, middle and high school students are expected to return to in-person learning. When community disease activity was high, but plateauing or even incrementally increasing, additional mitigation measures could be put in place to offset those risks. Unfortunately, when community disease activity is increasing exponentially, there is not sufficient capacity in the system to manage the additional mitigation measures necessary for bringing on thousands more students.

As I have indicated in prior communications, school is not an inherently dangerous or unsafe environment with regards to COVID-19. However, when COVID-19 disease rates increase and stress the health care system to this extent, the business community and community residents must take steps to reduce the number of individuals infecting one another with COVID-19. Under these circumstances, schools should not be considered in isolation from the rest of the community.

Elementary schools and small-group instruction in middle and high school have successfully provided in-person learning in a hybrid model without COVID-19 disease transmission within the classroom environment. Students and staff with COVID-19 have been present at school, but their infections, through case investigation and contact tracing, have not been shown to have occurred because of attending school. Students and staff have had to quarantine because of close contact with students, or more frequently staff who have been infected with COVID-19. Neither secondary nor sustained transmission of COVID-19 have been seen in school environments where appropriate infection control measures have been followed.

Without evidence of outbreaks or secondary transmission of COVID-19 in elementary schools or small-group instructions, there is no basis at this time to return these to distance learning. The benefit of schools for many students and families has not changed. The low risk of transmission in elementary schools and with small groups has not changed.

With the increase in community COVID-19 disease activity, Benton-Franklin Health District is also recommending that school districts follow the Governor’s restrictions for youth and adult sporting activities:



- Indoor activities and all contests and games are prohibited.
- Outdoor activities shall be limited to intra-team practices only, with facial coverings required for all coaches, volunteers and athletes at all times.

Since the summer, there have been several cases associated with youth sporting activities; as those activities move indoors, the risk for virus transmission will increase.

In addition, Benton-Franklin Health District recommends encouraging staff and students to adhere to the travel advisory issued by the Governor and avoid non-essential travel to other states and countries. If staff or students are returning from non-essential travel to other states or countries, they should be encouraged to self-quarantine for 14 days upon returning to Washington State.

In late July through August, the community had demonstrated the capacity to respond collectively and quickly to lower rates of disease transmission and I had remained hopeful that the community would do so again with a renewed commitment to following the necessary and proven infection control measures to reduce spread of COVID-19. In the last 2 - 3 weeks, however, disease activity rates have accelerated even more quickly than over the summer. In order for public health to be successful, we need to recommit to and bolster alignment of goals among our medical, businesses and community leaders, and the community as a whole.

Benton and Franklin county residents play a key role in reducing community transmission by wearing face coverings, maintaining physical distancing, avoiding gatherings with people outside their household and staying home if sick or a close contact with someone with COVID-19.

Sincerely,



Amy D. Person, M.D.

Health Officer, Benton-Franklin Health District

