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San Juan County School Leaders

I am recommending that all San Juan County schools utilize distance learning as their delivery model this fall until the disease is better controlled in our state and nation. I realize that many of you have already reached this conclusion and are moving forward with specific plans for online learning.

While initially many schools were developing multiple tracks and planned to choose one of them, I believe most programs are now planning on putting all efforts into distance learning models. As we move through the fall we will see from the experience of others how in person education fairs. So far there have been some very hard lessons with those starting out with that model. I think it is very reasonable to view reopening the schools over time and in a staged progressive manor similar to the Phases of reopening in Washington State as whole. With a firm foundation of distance learning moving into or backing away from a progressive opening will be possible with the least disruption if a third wave of severe disease emerges.

Plans that have a staged approach with distance learning as a foundation are more likely to be flexible and allow accommodation of community fluctuations in the number of cases.

While San Juan County has had few cases to date, that number could swing quickly in our small county, and it would take very few cases to shift us from a relatively positive situation to one that was far, far more concerning. While nothing about these decisions is easy or simple, here are the reasons that have led me to this difficult recommendation:

- We still know relatively little about the transmission of the disease in the school setting. Initial information from school districts already open across the United States is very concerning.

- It is unclear if children have resistance to the infection, or if they are infected but do not develop symptoms. In order to ensure the safety of our community, we must assume that children have infection patterns similar to adults until proven otherwise.

- It is now clear that between 30-40% of those infected do not show symptoms, but are just as infectious as those who do. It is my belief that these numbers apply to children as well. We also now know that most infections are transmitted with individuals are either asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic making this a very difficult disease to control without medications or a vaccine.

- There is increasingly clear evidence that the illness may spread through aerosols, which means the disease may spread faster, easier, and farther than was first understood. This is especially concerning for buildings that have traditional HVAC systems without sophisticated air filtering capabilities.

- The high likelihood of infections increasing when in-person schooling resumes will inevitably be coupled with the practical and logistical challenges of schools quickly shifting from in-person to remote schooling until a vaccine is available for prevention of infection in the first place.

Even with the lower transmission rates and the excellent prevention efforts we have in San Juan County, cases will still likely occur in our schools should they reopen to in-person learning. As cases increase from regional and national sources it is likely that opening schools could amplify cases and cause increased risks not just for school children, teachers and staff but the community in general where a significant number of people are very high risk. School-based transmission could create a third wave of infections that would be higher and longer than what we have seen so far.



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Clearly schools provide important services to the community in addition to education. Children having a safe place during the day for single parents or when both parents work is a critical function. Those students whose needs are the greatest are most reliant on our schools for support. Nutrition support for young growing minds has become a core offering of schools. Socialization, while not formally a curriculum item is a very important part of the school setting particularly for younger children. And keeping a healthy body and mind through exercise has been very successfully provided by schools and has become another essential part of our educational system. While we may have to put off classroom education these additional functions should be evaluated and I strongly encourage schools to see if there are ways to provide these important functions in safe ways even without classroom activities being in session. This will require creativity and innovation. Each island is likely to find solutions for the unique populations and resources found in the very different environments each district finds itself.

As you know better than anyone, schools play a vital role in the lives of our students, our families, and our community. I fully support the efforts of schools and your partner organizations to find creative, thoughtful and out of the box ways to continue to provide as many of these services as you can. I look forward to ongoing conversations to help you offer all possible services as safely as possible. I encourage you to work with the other community service organization in finding a path forward in these difficult times. The prevention initiatives, food support programs, recreation agencies, service organizations and community foundations, all have a critical place in our communities, and especially during these unprecedented times.

We need to work together to meet the personal and learning needs of all children in a safe and supportive environment. Those children with high-needs will likely have to have some limited in person programs even in these times with proper protection measures to ensure their safety, their families and the safety of the service providers themselves

I understand that the proposed delaying in person education compounds the challenges already faced by teachers, students and families in our community. These hardships and uncertainty make it more difficult in the short term but I believe provide the most realistic chance of a long-term solution to the challenges we face today.

We will continue to work with you to find the best scientific information to base policies on, to develop practical solutions, to provide detailed monitoring of disease activity and to continue to provide consultation to all levels of public and private education in our county. I will continue my weekly meetings with the superintendents in each public-school district and consultations with the private schools as needed. These are some of the most difficult times in my 40 years as a health officer in Washington State. What I have found over those years is that working together we can always find practical, cooperative approaches to solving our problems as a community united by the drive to both educate our children and to keep them safe. I believe that by going slowly at the beginning we have the best chance of a sustainable advancement with steady progress toward times when we can all be back to doing the activities we love in the community we all share.

I know that each program will find the path the is right for the community you are in, I do believe a phased in approach with all distance learning, followed when safe by a hybrid approach starting with the youngest children first and then finally in school education for everyone. Each shift can be informed by the decreasing risks as we move forward. It is unlikely that we will have school back in full session resembling last fall until a vaccine is available and most people are protected. This could be as early as January.

Sincerely,