

September 25, 2020

**TO: Public K-12 School Superintendents – Ferry, Pend Oreille, Stevens Counties
Private School Administrators – Ferry, Pend Oreille, Stevens Counties**

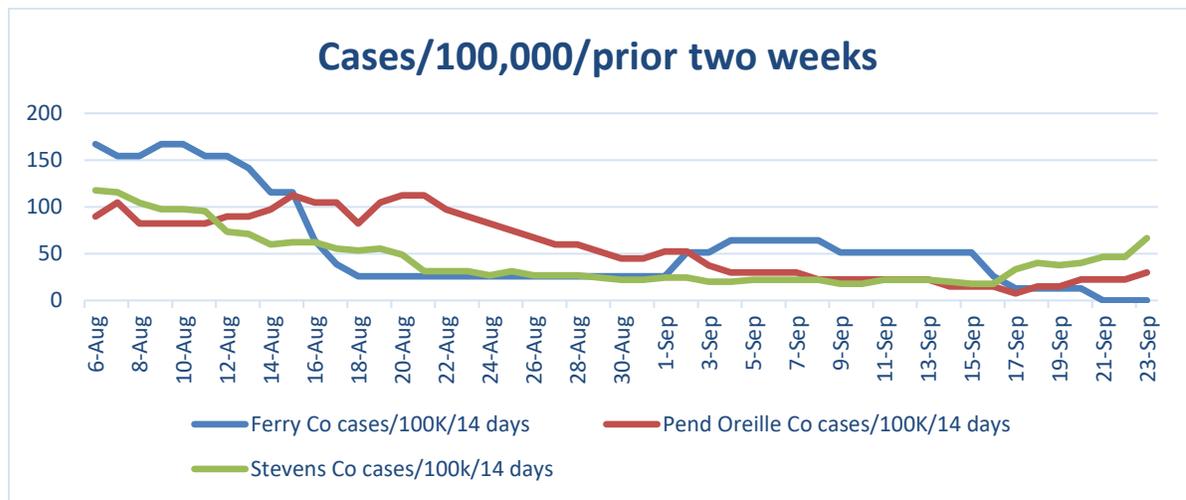
FROM: Dr. Sam Artzis, Health Officer

SUBJECT: Revised Public Health Officer Recommendation for Educational Modality

In conjunction with school districts within Ferry, Pend Oreille, and Stevens Counties, Northeast Tri County Health District (NETCHD) has been working to coordinate COVID-19 prevention/response activities. NETCHD is appreciative of the complexities of providing educational opportunities to youth throughout northeastern Washington through this pandemic.

On August 6, 2020 I provided a strong recommendation that schools throughout Ferry, Pend Oreille, and Stevens Counties plan for distance learning at the start of the school year. This recommendation was based on high levels of COVID-19 disease activities in each county, modeling that forecasted a likely increase in overall transmission into September, and stresses on key areas of public and medical health systems. Since that time, the three counties of northeastern Washington have seen improvements in the following areas:

1. Overall disease transmission rates have been steadily decreasing and stabilizing since late August as demonstrated below:



Stevens County - 240 E. Dominion, Colville, WA 99114
 Administration Phone: 509-684-2262, Fax: 509-684-1002
 Community Health Phone: 509-684-2262, Fax: 509-684-9878
 Environmental Health Phone: 509-684-2262, Fax: 509-684-8506

Ferry County - 147 N. Clark, PO Box 584, Republic, WA 99166
Phone: 509-775-3111, Fax: 509-775-2858
 Pend Oreille County - 605 Highway 20, Newport, WA 99156
Phone: 509-447-3131, Fax: 509-447-5644

By early October (assuming current conditions persist) this rate stabilization will result in moderate levels of disease transmission for approximately three incubation cycles of COVID-19. Note that a recent outbreak within a congregate care settings has resulted in 14 positive cases in residents of a Stevens County facility. As it relates to school reopening, our focus is on rates of community transmission. Our goal in public health is to contain outbreaks and limit community wide transmission from them.

2. The most recent Institute of [Disease Modeling Report](#) indicates that in eastern Washington, the overall trend in case counts is slightly decreasing or has plateaued depending on the region (with some counties being the exception.) The overall best estimate of the effective reproductive number in eastern Washington is 0.94. Overall reductions in cases suggest that mask wearing, limiting gathering size, and keeping physical distance are offsetting recent increases in social and economic activities compared to earlier in the pandemic. The report is cautionary that the risk does remain high for outbreaks that can spark large increases in case counts within a county, especially in vulnerable populations.
3. Our capacity within public health to rapidly investigate confirmed cases and their close contacts have improved since August. However, it is reasonable to assume that complete re-opening of schools to in-person instruction will result in additional cases and could stress our ability to respond effectively.
4. Our local and regional medical system readiness to provide medical care for our community has improved.

With these improved metrics and status in key areas of public health and medical care, **it is my recommendation that schools consider reopening for additional in-person instruction in accordance with the Washington State Department of Health [Decision Tree for Provisions of In Person Learning](#) under the educational modality provisions of “Moderate” levels of COVID-19 levels on or after October 5, 2020.** Under this educational modality recommendation school districts should:

1. Maintain distance learning provisions but consider expanding in-person instruction to K-12. Cohorting, alternating schedules, and staggered schedules are all critical considerations to help limit contact between students and staff, decrease class size and promote social distancing.
2. Not hold in-person extra-curricular activities or events that would result in the gathering of 10 or more students/staff.
3. Identify and train COVID-19 coordinators to oversee COVID-19 prevention and response activities within each school building and the school district.

With more in-person instructional opportunities it is critical that schools have staff, space, and processes in place to fully meet the requirements of the Washington State Department of Health [K-12 School Fall 2020-2021 Guidance](#), which includes the following **key mitigation strategies**:

1. Protect staff and students who are at [increased risk](#) for severe COVID-19 illness.
2. Institute effective illness protocols to [exclude, isolate, or test](#) those ill with COVID-19 like

illnesses and have protocols in place to [respond to an outbreak](#).

3. Limit the number of students/staff within areas to maintain physical distancing of at least 6 feet.
4. Ensure face coverings are properly used by staff and students.
5. Ensure safeguards are in place during transportation of students.
6. Promote handwashing.
7. Provide for effective and frequent [cleaning and disinfection](#). Discourage sharing of items, particularly those that are difficult to clean or disinfect.
8. Use effective ventilation/filtration practices throughout facilities.
9. Cancel or modify in-person activities that are considered high risk (choir, playing instruments that involve breath, contact sports, or other activities that require students to remove face coverings and/or be in close contact with one another.)
10. To the extent possible, close communal use of shared spaces or stagger use with cleaning/disinfection between uses.

Progressing through the rest of the school year, we will be committed to continue evaluating the data and key readiness indicators at the individual county level. When there is sustainability in reduced levels of community spread of COVID-19, we will closely coordinate with school administrators to provide recommendations for increased in-person instructional opportunities. Likewise, if there is sustained increases of COVID-19 and increased community spread, we will revise our recommendations accordingly.

Our collective success within school and communities is dependent upon students, families, teachers, school staff, and all community members taking actions to prevent transmission where we live, work and learn. Let's keep working together to slow the spread of this disease.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Samuel Artzis MD". The signature is cursive and includes the letters "MD" at the end.

Dr. Samuel Artzis, MD
Health Officer, Northeast Tri County Health District

cc: Northeast Tri County Health District Board of Health