

NEWS

Washington state health officials consider loosening restrictions on school reopenings

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SEATTLE (AP) — Washington state health officials are considering changing the disease metrics that guide school district reopening decisions during the pandemic.

The Seattle Times reports the changes, if adopted, mean up to half the state's 300 school districts would meet the benchmark to start educating their youngest learners in person at least part-time.

The proposed changes were outlined in a state Department of Health presentation given to Gov. Jay Inslee's office on Nov. 6.

Under the state's current reopening guidelines, which aren't legally binding, school districts are advised to educate students remotely unless their county posts a coronavirus infection rate of fewer than 75 cases per 100,000 residents over a 14-day period. The draft changes to those guidelines would increase that threshold to 200 cases per 100,000.

Kitsap County's 14-day infection rate as of Wednesday was 164.6 cases per 100,000 residents.

Only about 32 of the state's 300 school districts meet the current benchmark to start educating their youngest learners based on their county infection rates. But if the proposed changes are eventually implemented, the number of districts would increase to around 150. Because they aren't required to follow these guidelines, some districts have decided to remain closed or reopen regardless.

Infection rates in the state's most populous counties — King, Snohomish and Pierce — are currently too high to begin in-person learning under this proposed change.

It's unclear how much impact changing the guidelines would have on school district decisions. In the Puget Sound region, some districts have relied on these metrics but also created additional requirements, often at the request of teachers unions.

In October, a wave of King County school districts announced they were going to bring back young learners based on infection rates at the time, but then backpedaled once they saw a wave of new infections catapult them past the 75-case benchmark. Some districts, mostly in Central and Eastern Washington, decided to reopen despite these guidelines.

Around 54% of students in the state are attending school districts that teach between 90% and 99% of their students remotely.