

Kitsap Sun

LOCAL

Kitsap school districts eye reopening schools in January

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Central Kitsap School District on Friday announced it is still aiming for a phased return to in-person classes beginning on Jan. 11. District officials on Jan. 6 will make a go-no-go decision, based on COVID-19 case rates at that time.

North Kitsap School District has also announced a tentative return to school buildings on Jan. 11. Other local districts haven't yet specified a target date but all are plowing toward gradually reopening schools in January, starting with the youngest and most vulnerable learners.

Their plans are rolling forward despite a surge in new COVID-19 cases locally, statewide and nationwide, as cold weather has pushed more people indoors. And the impact of holiday gatherings with folks outside one's household — strongly discouraged by state and local health officials and the CDC — is yet to be seen.

Kitsap County's 14-day rate of new cases per 100,000 population stood at 169.7 as of Monday, more than twice as high as the state's threshold for safely resuming classes part-time for small groups of students, including the youngest and those with high needs. Two weeks ago, the rate was 102.1 per 100,000.

The rate was 73.8 per 100,000 on Nov. 6, when districts jettisoned plans to return to classes in mid-November. Bainbridge Island schools' return had already been put on pause by then.

COVID-19 case rates are climbing as district officials face mounting pressure to resume in-person classes, and not just from parents weary of overseeing online lessons while many try to maintain their own jobs.

UNICEF, the international child welfare agency, on Nov. 19, issued a dire warning of a generation "lost" to the potential long-term effects on children of remote learning as the pandemic drags on. Other experts, including the CDC, have cited losses in academic growth, social needs and mental health challenges among the risks of extended distance learning as school officials and communities weigh the benefits of returning to in-person learning.

“Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a persistent myth that children are barely

affected by the disease. Nothing could be further from the truth,” said Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director. “While children can get sick and can spread the disease, this is just the tip of the pandemic iceberg. Disruptions to key services and soaring poverty rates pose the biggest threat to children. The longer the crisis persists, the deeper its impact on children’s education, health, nutrition and well-being. The future of an entire generation is at risk.”

Children and young people appear less vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19, but some have experienced severe illness and even death. Health experts have determined that children, and others, can transmit the disease even when they don't have symptoms.

Adults over 65 and people with underlying health conditions are at higher risk of complications and death from contracting the virus. To date, 26 people in Kitsap County have died from COVID-19.

Preventive measures taken by school districts are potentially effective in stopping the spread of the virus, but only insofar as the community as a whole embraces measures like wearing masks, social distancing, congregating in small groups of the same people, frequent hand washing and staying home when ill, according to the Institute for Disease Modeling

Kitsap County as of Monday had 141 confirmed or probable cases in isolation and 731 people who were close contacts in quarantine.

Here's where districts stand

Here's where districts stand on their decisions to return to in-person learning. Most have begun offering direct services to a limited number of students with special education needs.

Central Kitsap schools will decide by Jan. 6 whether to return kindergarten and first-grade students to in-person learning in a hybrid model (part-time in-person, part-time online learning). If that's not possible, the district will bring back very small groups of students who are struggling the most. If all goes well, students through fifth grade will gradually return to schools in the hybrid model. Secondary students in grades 6-12 will continue in remote mode until at least Jan. 28.

South Kitsap School District as of Nov. 12 said it will remain on pause until case trends remain in the moderate level (below 75 per 100,000 over two weeks) for at least one week before it will consider a restart. The district has reported four positive cases, all among staff members with no students exposed. All of those who tested positive and those potentially exposed were advised to quarantine in line with guidance from the Kitsap Public Health District.

Bremerton School District's plans remain paused, Superintendent Aaron Leavell said in a Nov. 13 news release. The district will give an update the week of Nov. 30.

"While our goal remains to bring back students K-12 for face-to-face learning as soon as possible, we are not setting a reopening date at this point," Leavell said. "We will continue to monitor the

COVID-19 data and are in regular contact with the Kitsap Public Health District as we evaluate our reentry plans and timeline."

North Kitsap School District on Nov. 4 notified families of its projected Jan. 11 start date for students in pre-K through second grade to begin hybrid learning.

"This start date will allow us to continue monitoring staffing levels and the impact of the holidays on case trend data prior to a potential re-opening. In the meantime, we will be working to ensure staffing levels support our re-opening when case trends allow us to welcome back students," the district said in a news release.

Bainbridge Island School District on Oct. 26 notified families it would pause plans to return to schools, except for certain special needs students. On Nov. 16 the district issued a public advisory that there had been one positive case at Sakai Intermediate School.

"The individual who tested positive is safely isolating at home," the district said. "The Kitsap Public Health District has been informed and any close contacts of the individual have been notified and advised as appropriate."

North Mason schools Superintendent Dana Rosenbach on Nov. 20 acknowledged the toll on families.

"The pandemic and its local presence create so much stress and uncertainty," Rosenbach said in a public notice on social media. "I know it can be stressful wondering when we will begin implementation of our hybrid model. We want kids back in the classroom where they can best learn as soon as possible."

District officials will analyze data and advice of health officials this week.

"Right now, we are in a holding pattern. We will continue in our current status through Thanksgiving," Rosenbach said. "We will re-evaluate the week of November 30th and share our future plans for returning."

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