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# Washington State Officials Are Considering Loosening Guidelines to Reopen Schools

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FILE PHOTO — Desks are separated by six feet to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 at Winlock Miller Elementary School.

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Washington state health officials are considering changing the disease metrics that guide school district reopening decisions during the pandemic. If adopted, 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 (DOH) presentation given to Gov. Jay Inslee's office Nov. 6. The presentation also contains detailed data about coronavirus outbreaks in schools and information about a coronavirus school testing pilot that has not been shared with the public.

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.

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.

On Tuesday, a spokesperson for the state Department of Health said: "The proposed updates are still under review and there is no timeline for releasing any updates to the school decision tree."

But the presentation follows intense criticism by some school district administrators, parents and observers who accuse the state of using too strict a benchmark. A copy of the presentation was posted online by a state Senate Republican Caucus staff member.

Katy Payne, a spokesperson for the state's education department, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, said the agency provided information to DOH on how school districts were operating during the pandemic. But it did not have input on the presentation, nor did it advocate for adjusting the benchmarks.

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.

The records show the state is leaning on emerging evidence that schools are not significant drivers of the virus when safety precautions, such as mandatory masks and social distancing, are properly in place.

For instance, the presentation includes charts from a national database of COVID-19 cases in schools that suggests buildings, particularly those that serve elementary school students, can reopen where community spread is low. The database was created by Brown University economist Emily Oster and her colleagues, and is the most comprehensive repository of information on COVID-19 and schools to date. But it has significant limitations: it is crowdsourced, not yet nationally representative and includes limited data about public schools in Washington.

"We continue to review the science and review our own state data, including additional data from and across the U.S. as we continue to consider updates to the metrics. We will include science, data, and the limitations of data in any final documents that we publish when/if we update the decision tree," the DOH spokesperson said.

The proposed changes to the reopening guidelines, called the "Decision Tree," would make Washington state's standards the most relaxed on the West Coast, and more in line with incidence rates recommended by several East Coast states and the Harvard Global Health Institute.

Since the start of the pandemic, the state has logged at least 42 coronavirus school outbreaks. A school outbreak is defined as at least two cases among staff or students with strong evidence of transmission within the school. Of the 32 outbreaks this school year, 20 are tied to public schools and 12 to private schools, the presentation shows.

The presentation offers new insight into where these outbreaks occurred and who was infected — information The Seattle Times has formally requested several times over the past month.

The largest school outbreak so far was at a Spokane County private school, which was linked to at least nine cases of the virus. Sixteen outbreaks have been linked to Spokane County, the most of any, followed by Snohomish with seven, King with four, and Clark with four, according to a Nov. 2 DOH report posted online by the same Republican Caucus staffer. The document included no further detail on which school districts or schools experienced outbreaks.

Data in the Nov. 2 report shows that 74% of school outbreaks here happened in counties with high levels of coronavirus, while only 5% were recorded in low-risk counties; this fits with Oster's preliminary findings from her database that suggest risks are lower when coronavirus spread is contained in the community.

Of those infected in a school outbreak, 20% were 10 or younger and 30% were between ages 11 and 17, the presentation shows. Among adults, 18% were aged 18-44; 32% were 45 or older. A recent unpublished study of Washington coronavirus

cases by age suggests that incidence is highest in those under 40.

More than 16,000 people aged 19 and younger have contracted the coronavirus in Washington state over the course of the pandemic. Five died from the illness and 20 have been hospitalized, according to the Nov. 2 report. Four who died were in their mid- to late teenage years, and one was 5 years old or younger.

State officials said they hadn't found evidence that anyone had been hospitalized or died because of a school-based outbreak, but acknowledged that the system for reporting outbreaks and tracking cases from a school was flawed.

"Cases have not been consistently linked to outbreak events ... and many key fields are left blank, making it difficult to understand the scope of the outbreaks or draw inference on the highest risk groups within these settings," read the Nov. 2 report. "Second, there may be some delay in receiving reports of outbreaks, so there could be underreporting, particularly in the most recent weeks."

The documents also shed light on plans to deliver rapid coronavirus tests to schools: DOH officials have said they intend to distribute 1 million tests, and the presentation shows that 13 school districts, including Highline and Tahoma, are being considered for a testing pilot.

DOH did not immediately respond to several questions, such as the status of its rapid test stockpile for schools or why it is considering changes to the reopening Decision Tree.

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