

NEWS

State, Kitsap health officials reviewing social-distancing requirements in schools

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State and local health agencies are reviewing possible changes to K-12 school physical-distancing requirements based on updated COVID-19 guidance provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

CDC recommends that masked students maintain a distance of at least 3 feet in classroom settings. Previously, CDC suggested 6 feet of distance between masked students to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The 3-feet-distancing guideline is recommended for all elementary school students, regardless of community transmission rates. For middle-school and high-school students, CDC's recommendation of 3-feet distancing would change to 6 feet if transmission rates become high, and cohorting — keeping students in the same groups throughout the day — is not possible.

Earlier this week, the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) issued a statement regarding the CDC's update.

"WASA has been urging Gov. Inslee and the Department of Health to provide flexibility on these guidelines because, as the CDC noted last week, the science suggests schools can resume in-person learning safely while moving the physical-distancing requirement among students from 6 feet to 3 feet, said Joel Aune, WASA executive director.

"Because of classroom space limitations, providing flexibility on the 6-foot distancing requirement is essential if we are to bring all students back to full-time in-person learning. We are hopeful the governor and DOH will follow the CDC's movement on the physical distancing requirements and get our students back to in-person learning."

School districts in Kitsap and Mason counties are currently using 6 feet as the standard for student-distancing protocols. Spokespersons from two school districts — Central Kitsap's David Beil and Bremerton's Karen Bevers — described the CDC update as encouraging.

"However, the state Department of Health has its own guidance that requires K-12 students and staff in Washington state to stay 6 feet apart in classrooms and hallways," Beil said. "This guidance has not yet changed."

Beil said CKSD has been measuring classrooms and common spaces at schools in anticipation of possible physical-distancing changes.

"Based on 3-foot guidance, we would have some areas in our schools that will need to be adjusted before we would be able to accommodate more students," Beil said.

Bevers said Bremerton School District isn't planning to make any changes until guidance is provided from the Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction as well as the state DOH and/or Kitsap Public Health District.

"We anticipate any impacts to our in-person model would be implemented in the fall of 2021," Bevers added.

Dr. Gib Morrow, health officer for Kitsap Public Health Department, said the new CDC guidance is being taken under advisement.

"We are working closely with our school superintendents, other local health jurisdictions across the state, and with the Department of Health to develop a uniform statewide guidance for physical distancing in the classroom that aligns with recent recommendations from the CDC and expect this should be forthcoming shortly," Morrow said.

New physical-distancing requirements, Morrow warned, shouldn't be a signal for schools to become relaxed in the fight to stop the virus spread.

"Schools that elect to implement these changes, if they are approved by the DOH, will need to continue aggressive efforts to minimize disease transmission at this crucial time in the pandemic," Morrow said. "We need to prevent new variants from emerging and spreading at this time of continued high disease activity and with a still relatively small minority of people immunized."

Morrow added that reducing physical distancing from 6 to 3 feet could affect the number of students who are identified as "close contacts" if positive cases do emerge in school settings. Those students would need to be excluded from school and quarantined for a certain amount of time.

"We feel it is important that schools and families understand this," Morrow said.