Oct. 9, 2020

Pierce County School Superintendents and Heads of Schools:

On Oct. 7, the 14-day COVID-19 case rate in Pierce County hit 75.6 per 100,000 population (with a 6-day data lag). That moves our disease activity level from moderate (25-75) to high (over 75) in the Department of Health’s Decision Tree for the Provision of In Person Learning.

Schools should prepare to return to the education modality for high disease activity level: “distance learning with the option for limited in-person learning in small groups, or cohorts, of students for the highest need students.”

We share the data that drives our decisions.

When the county entered the moderate level at the beginning of September, we advised schools they could begin a gradual return to in-person education for elementary students. We also said we would be using the case count trends and other metrics to inform future decisions. Sharing this information regularly is one of the commitments we made to you as part of our collaboration during the pandemic.

We notified you last week of a worrisome increase in case numbers and warned of the potential need to return to remote learning if case rates remained elevated. For schools already moving forward with reopening plans, we encouraged a pause in bringing back additional students. Now that we have crossed into the high level in the state decision tree, we will watch to see if the rate is going to stay in that range for a sustained period. Our analysis shows it likely will.

Recommendation to return to remote learning likely.

You asked to avoid rapid back-and-forth changes (“yo-yoing”) and for adequate notice to plan when the disease activity shifts between levels. We are committed to providing a two-week observation period. It begins today, Oct. 9. If we stay in the high level for the next two weeks, you should follow the decision tree and return to remote learning Oct. 26. The decision tree allows an exception for students of the highest need. Schools may offer in person learning for highest need students in small groups of up to five students with up to two staff for in-person learning.

The governor’s office released guidance on Oct. 6 for sporting activities that includes school sports. Under high COVID activity levels, games and competitions should not be held when in-person
learning is not occurring. Only small groups of six can practice or train together. We encourage you to notify your families and athletic partners of this shift in disease activity level so they plan to adjust their sports activities.

Outbreaks

We will work directly with schools and districts if an outbreak occurs. If necessary, we will close in-person activities and require remote learning until the outbreak is controlled.

We provide support and guidance to schools during COVID-19.

We commit to continue to work together to keep students, staff, and our community safe.

- We recently developed an online portal to report a COVID-19 case in a school, making it easier and more convenient for school officials to share information with us.
- To help you communicate to families about information you need to share with the Health Department in the event of COVID-19 positive cases that may occur during in-person learning, we are working on a letter you can provide to families. We will add this letter to the Schools COVID-19 case response tool kit.
- Please share the message to mask up, stay 6 feet apart, and stay home if you are not feeling well. It’s also a good time to get your flu shot. Find more information and locations at www.tpchd.org/flu.
- These simple actions will help our students return for in-person learning.

Sincerely,

Anthony L-T Chen, MD, MPH
Director of Health