Basis for Recommendation to Not Reopen Washoe County Schools

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There are a number of factors that should be considered when determining whether to reopen schools. From a public health perspective, while battling a COVID-19 pandemic, one factor that is consistently identified in guidance documents is to make decisions to reopen in light of the local conditions and levels of COVID-19 transmission. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance states, “It is important to consider community transmission risk as schools reopen. Evidence from schools internationally suggests that school re-openings are safe in communities with low SARS-CoV-2 transmission rates. Computer simulations from Europe have suggested that school re-openings may further increase transmission risk in communities where transmission is already high.”

The CDC Guidance further states, “If there is substantial, uncontrolled transmission, schools should work closely with local health officials to make decisions on whether to maintain school operations. The health, safety, and wellbeing of students, teachers, staff and their families is the most important consideration in determining whether school closure is a necessary step. Communities can support schools staying open by implementing strategies that decrease a community’s level of transmission. However, if community transmission levels cannot be decreased, school closure is an important consideration. Plans for virtual learning should be in place in the event of a school closure.”

The State of California has established criteria for monitoring county levels of COVID-19 transmission and has determined not to allow schools to reopen if they exceed thresholds established in the criteria. The State of Nevada has also established a county tracking system for elevated disease transmission that incorporates several of the California thresholds. These thresholds include the testing that is being conducted per 100,000 population and the number of new cases per 100,000 population over a 14-day period. In addition, the White House has identified Nevada counties as having elevated disease transmission levels and recommendations for additional community mitigation measures. The Governor has directed these counties, which include Washoe County, to report on actions that they are taking in regard to these recommendations.

The Harvard Global Health Institute has published school reopening guidance that also is based upon an assessment of community levels of transmission. The different levels of county transmission used by the Harvard guidance are based on new cases per 100,000 population using a 7-day moving average. The Harvard guidance notes that, “As of mid-July, all countries that
have opened schools without further school-based outbreaks had achieved low case incidence levels by the time they opened schools.”

The Harvard guidance does establish a first priority for reopening for preK-5th grade classes and preK–8th grade special education classes, a second priority for 6th-8th grade classes and 9th-12th grade special education classes, and a third priority for 9th-12th grade classes. The Harvard guidance is also based on the schools being able to establish pandemic resilient teaching and learning spaces that they acknowledge will require a commitment of District, State, and Federal resources. The guidance recommends schools only reopen if community transmission levels permit it and “if conditions for pandemic resilient teaching and learning spaces can be achieved at scale; districts, states, and federal government invest in healthy buildings and healthy classrooms; in the absence of conditions for pandemic resilient teaching and learning spaces, schools continue with remote learning.”

Washoe County has been experiencing an increasing number of new cases per day since July 12 and set a new record high number of 159 cases on Saturday, July 25. Washoe County exceeds the Nevada County Tracking threshold for elevated transmission of disease. That threshold, which California is also using, is 100 new cases per 100,000 population over a 14-day period. As of July 25 Washoe County had 240.5 new cases of COVID-19 per 100,000 population over the 14-day period, far exceeding this threshold. The County is also exceeding Nevada’s threshold of 7% daily testing positivity rate. Washoe County has also exceeded the White House threshold of 100 new cases of COVID-19 per 100,000 over the period of a week. As of July 25, Washoe County had 140.1 cases per 100,000 population over the previous week. Based on this level of cases occurring, the White House recommends, and Washoe County is requesting, that gatherings be limited to 25 people or less.

Washoe County is currently identified as orange risk level by the Harvard Global Health Institute. The orange range spans 10 <25 daily new cases per 100,000 populations. As of July 26 the 7-day moving average for Washoe county was 97, a new record high and increasing. This amounts to 20.3 new cases per 100,000 population. The 159 cases reported on July 25th amounts to 33.3 new cases per 100,000 population that day. The Harvard guidance cautions, “In addition to paying attention to the incidence levels, decision-makers should pay close attention to
direction of trend and rate of change. While jurisdictions may plateau in yellow, in the orange level spread tends to have more velocity—i.e. conditions may shift from orange to the red level more quickly than from yellow to orange. In the absence of investment in pandemic resilient schools and the increasing number of new daily cases, reopening is not advisable under the Harvard guidance either.

In fact, Dr. Ashish Jha, the director of the Harvard Global Health Institute, said in a statement, “If you are in a red zone, there is simply no way to safely open schools now. Orange zones will struggle as well. If you open schools in these areas, the chances are that those will likely close quickly when teachers, staff, and possibly students start getting sick in large numbers. If leaders in these counties want to reopen schools in the fall, they must bring down the level of virus, starting now. Yellow counties are in a slightly better position, but must still make hard choices.”

Based upon the high and upward trending COVID-19 transmission rates currently occurring in Washoe County and the high potential for school reopening to contribute to continued increasing levels of transmission occurring; it is my recommendation to not open schools for students to return at this time. My recommendation is to work to enhance distance learning and to allow teachers to return to their classrooms to conduct distance learning education. School reopening could be considered when new cases occurring in Washoe County are reduced to less than 100 per 100,000 population over a 14-day period and daily new cases are on a decreasing trend.


2California County Data Monitoring: [https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/COVID-19/COVID19CountyDataTable.aspx](https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/COVID-19/COVID19CountyDataTable.aspx)

3COVID-19 and Reopening In-Person Learning Framework for K-12 Schools in California, 2020-2021 School Year: [https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/CDPH%20Document%20Library/COVID-19/Schools%20Reopening%20Recommendations.pdf](https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/CDPH%20Document%20Library/COVID-19/Schools%20Reopening%20Recommendations.pdf)


7Path to Zero: Key Metrics for COVID Suppression: [https://globalepidemics.org/key-metrics-for-covid-suppression/](https://globalepidemics.org/key-metrics-for-covid-suppression/)
Path to Zero & Schools: Achieving Pandemic Resilient Teaching and Learning Spaces Release: 