



# Department of Public Health

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## Additional Information on School Recommendations

People may ask why Skagit County Public Health is not recommending or requiring schools to close.

We take these concerns seriously. The health and safety of the people of Skagit County is our priority, just as the health and safety of students is the priority for our school districts.

Decisions about closing schools and canceling events must be made while considering the best information we have about this disease and effective prevention as well as the wide-reaching impacts school closures have on our community.

Ultimately, families need to do what is best for their children and other loved ones. We aim to provide information and guidance that will help in making those decisions.

**We are not recommending closures at this time, but school districts may make the decision to close schools. We support them with information and guidance.**

Skagit County is in communication with school districts. We know that the leaders in our school districts are our best partners in deciding the right next steps for their schools. They know their communities well.

While we are not recommending targeted or widespread closures at this time, if circumstances change, some districts may make the decision to close schools temporarily, either for a few days to do a deep clean or for a longer duration.

We are in close coordination with schools when there are concerns, and we help provide guidance on if, when, and for how long to take steps such as dismissals or closures. Dismissals are when students stay home but the school remains open for staff. Closures are when all students and staff stay home. Closures may be targeted or widespread, and the Health Officer does have the authority to require closures.

The steps that schools take, and that Skagit County Public Health recommends for schools, are likely to vary depending on the situation. These decisions are often made at the community level because the impact of this disease – the number and severity of cases, and the benefits and side-effects of closing – can vary from one school to another.

**We are recommending cancellation or postponement of non-essential large public gatherings.**

While we have not recommended closing any schools to date, it is advised to avoid non-essential gatherings. This may include social, arts, or athletic events that are not part of student instruction. We understand that this is likely to affect a number of after-school or weekend activities for school-age children.

Education is not a non-essential gathering. In fact, continuity of education is extremely important. Our guidance does not recommend cancellation or postponement of essential gatherings, and we are urging people to weigh the benefits of or need for a gathering against the risk of spreading disease. The larger the gathering and the closer the contact, the higher the risk.

**Recommendations may change.**

The fact that we are not currently recommending school closures does not mean we won't in the future. This is a long-term response effort. Recommending closures prematurely can create hardship if schools need to close in the future. Unnecessary or prolonged closures are disruptive to education and to families with school-age children who cannot work from home and/or do not have reliable child care. It is important that we time interventions to be most effective while minimizing negative impacts on the community.

In the event of school closures, you can expect communication directly from your school district. If the Health Officer recommends or requires widespread school closures, that will be communicated to our school districts and announced to the public promptly.

**COVID-19 has similarities to respiratory illnesses like the flu, but differs in its impact on kids.**

We've emphasized that the same prevention steps you take for flu are effective for COVID-19.

This list is important. That's why we keep repeating it.

- Wash hands frequently with warm water and soap, scrubbing all over your hands for at least 20 seconds.
- Stay home and away from others if you are ill. If you or your child has symptoms like cough, fever and/or difficulty breathing, the ill person should stay away from work, school or other activities.
- Avoid close contact with people who you know are ill or who are actively coughing or sneezing.
- Clean and disinfect the surfaces you touch most in your home or workplace. Follow instructions on the product label of the disinfectant you are using. The same disinfectants used in routine cleaning procedures are generally effective against human coronaviruses. Check the label to make sure the product is registered with the EPA and effective against human coronaviruses.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth.

While young children are considered a high-risk group for severe complications from the flu, they do not appear to be a high-risk group for severe complications from COVID-19. High-risk groups for COVID-19 include: people age 60 or older, people with an underlying medical condition like heart or lung disease, people who have weakened immune systems, or people who are pregnant. This is why CDC guidelines typically used for pandemic influenza are being adjusted slightly.

**School closures or dismissals have wide-reaching impacts in the community**

Closures can be effective in reducing the spread of disease. However, how effective a closure will be needs to be weighed against the impacts it causes.

When schools close, education is disrupted. Closures create challenges for high school seniors working toward graduation, teachers with carefully planned lessons who suddenly have fewer days to deliver them, and young children who are building foundational skills like literacy. School is also the safe place for many of our students who are living homeless or in unstable housing.

We've been asked about online or remote learning options as a way to maintain education during a dismissal or closure. This can be a useful tool, but it also assumes that students have access to computers, reliable internet, or other tools they need to participate in remote learning. Not all students have these resources, and unnecessary school cancellations can create or amplify inequities.

We defer to school districts on making plans for continuity of education. School closures may become necessary as part of this response effort, and we encourage districts to plan for learning options and to consider inequities.

School closures also impact families and workplaces. Though we are encouraging workplaces to allow employees to work from home if possible, not all jobs can be done remotely. Now is a good time for parents and guardians to make plans for child care in the event of school closures. However, we know that, realistically, not everyone has a readily available child care option, particularly if child care facilities close due to illness or because local schools are closing.

Closing schools could also create challenges for staffing essential services. Our first responders, emergency dispatchers, medical providers, and others who are crucial to this response effort, as well as other critical work, may not all have child care options in the event of prolonged school closures.

We also realize that many of our neighbors are living paycheck-to-paycheck and/or working multiple jobs. Staying home from work may not be feasible, and may jeopardize their housing status and ability to feed their family.

**There is no certain timeline for when the number of cases of this disease will begin to level off or decrease.**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, large gathering cancellations or school dismissals can be recommended for 14 days or possibly longer if advised by local health officials. This is part of the guidance for schools with identified cases of COVID-19 in their community.

A two-week closure may help limit spread during that time, but there is no guarantee the virus will not spread after the school reopens. Schools have a commitment to educating students and cannot close indefinitely.

Skagit County Public Health is not saying that school closures won't be necessary at some point. Things are changing quickly, and our community is feeling those changes keenly. However, it is important that we time interventions like school closures so that they are most effective with the least amount of negative impact on the people of Skagit County.

Parents or guardians with questions about excusing absences should contact their school district for guidance. Questions about specific symptoms, care, or risks for their child should be directed to their health care provider. Please remember to call ahead before going to a clinic if you or your child has symptoms of respiratory illness like cough, fever or difficulty breathing.

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Continue to watch for communications from your school district or Skagit County Public Health for any updates or changes in guidance.

*This guidance may look familiar, as it has been adapted from information produced by the Snohomish Health District. As Skagit County aligns its recommendations with neighboring counties, we are doing everything we can to maintain consistency of operations and messaging across geographical boundaries.*