

February 23, 2021

The Honorable Jay Inslee  
Governor, State of Washington

Dr. Umair Shah  
Secretary, Washington State Department of Health

Dear Governor Inslee and Dr. Shah,

As the undersigned school district superintendents and educational leaders in northeast Washington, we have and continue to appreciate the science-driven leadership each of you, and your respective teams, have provided throughout the ongoing SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

You have modeled – as we believe we have – the words of the famed South African cleric and anti-apartheid and human rights activist, Desmond Tutu: *“My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.”* You have shown care and compassion for the safety and well-being of all of the residents of our state, and we have strived to do the very same for all of our students, families and our school and district staff and colleagues.

We recognize that in the midst of a once-in-a-century pandemic, we must all work together to follow and implement mitigation factors that protect and maximize human safety, and simultaneously afford opportunities to meet our mission to provide students with the highest quality of learning and teaching they need and deserve.

While each of our districts and schools have chartered individual paths forward in navigating the transition from all remote learning to increasing degrees of in-person schooling; and though each region of the state is engaged in similar work; our collective region has been something of an action-research test case of the efficacy of in-person learning and teaching during the pandemic.

Throughout our individual journeys and our collective regional journey, we have worked closely with our respective local health jurisdictions to make informed decisions. We continue to be grateful for the work and guidance of these caring public health professionals, and we value that they have helped us balance a “need to be distant” with a similarly compelling “need to be together.”

We believe that we have substantively been successful in bringing increasing numbers of students and staff into school, while minimizing in-school transmission of the virus. Your recent letter to the Washington Education Association, Governor Inslee, speaks to this:

*What we have found is that, of those 200,000 students doing on-site learning, there has been minimal in-school transmission either between students or between students and staff. There have been 87 documented instances of in-school transmission out of 200,000 students. This is a remarkably low rate of transmission and the median number of people involved is two. There is a large amount of data and science investigating this issue across the United States, but the most compelling evidence is our own experience –Washington educators, because of their discipline and skills, know how to do this safely.*

We follow and monitor all non-therapeutic interventions with genuine fidelity. We have created and employed COVID response teams in our districts and schools; we engage in careful contact tracing; and we maintain COVID-19 dashboards either at the district/school level and/or in partnership with

NEWESD 101 [https://www.esd101.net/covid19/covid-19\\_dashboard](https://www.esd101.net/covid19/covid-19_dashboard) to assure our data is transparent to the public we serve.

Our individual and collective successful experiences have been similar to those of others across the state, the country and globally, and scientific research reports through organizations such as the Institute for Disease Modeling <https://covid.idmod.org/#/ResearchandReports> have documented that schools have not led to significant spread of the virus.

As we contemplate planning for the balance of the 2020-21 school year, and importantly as we turn our attention to the 2021-22 school year, **we write today to request needed consideration for some flexibility with the requirement of “at least six feet of physical distancing”** as required by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html#:~:text=To%20practice%20social%20or%20physical,indoor%20and%20outdoor%20space> s.

As articulated by the American Academy of Pediatrics <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>:

*There is a conflict between optimal academic and social/emotional learning in schools and strict adherence to current physical distancing guidelines. For example, the CDC recommends that schools "space seating/desks at least 6 feet apart when feasible." In many school settings, 6 feet between students is not feasible without drastically limiting the number of students. Some countries have been able to successfully reopen schools after first controlling community-wide spread of SARS-CoV-2 while using 3 feet of distance between students without increases in community spread.<sup>20</sup> Physical distance between desks should follow current public health guidance, and desks should be placed at least 3 feet apart and ideally 6 feet apart. In many jurisdictions, cloth face coverings are mandatory for children in public settings, including schools. **Schools should weigh the benefits of strict adherence to a 6-foot spacing rule between students with the potential downside if remote learning is the only alternative.***

In order for many of us to be able to bring *all* of our students who want to come back to in-person schooling, and not relegate some to continued remote learning, strict adherence to six feet of physical distance renders this desired outcome physically impossible.

**Respectfully, we request that some defined flexibility with physical distancing requirements be provided.**

We understand, support and will continue to follow all of the mitigation factors we continue to implement and require – and with flexibility as described by the AAP – we will be able to safely accommodate all of our students, and provide them the quality of learning and teaching they need and deserve, and to which we are sincerely committed.

Again, we deeply appreciate your careful leadership and stewardship of the health and well-being of all Washingtonians through the pandemic. We also appreciate your consideration for physical distancing flexibility that will allow us to serve each of our students in-person.

With gratitude and respect,

**The undersigned public school district superintendents and educational leaders in the NEWESD 101 region**

## **Public School District Superintendents**

Ms. Shauna Schmerer, Almira SD  
Mr. Bob Moore, Benge SD  
Mr. Rich McFarland, Chewelah SD  
Mr. Jerry Pugh, Colfax SD  
Mr. Greg Price, Columbia SD  
Mr. Don Hawpe, Cusick SD  
Mr. Jim Kowalkowski, Davenport SD  
Mr. Travis Hanson, Deer Park SD  
Dr. Randy Russell, Freeman SD  
Mr. Jeff Baerwald, Great Northern SD  
Mr. Kim Spacek, Inchelium SD  
Mr. Michael Olsen, Kettle Falls SD  
Mr. Doug Curtis, Lacrosse SD  
Mr. Brett Baum, Liberty SD  
Mr. Don Vanderholm, Lind-Ritzville Schools  
Mr. Brad Van Dyne, Loon Lake SD  
Mr. Rick Winters, Mary Walker SD  
Mr. Shawn Woodward, Mead SD  
Mr. Tim Ames, Medical Lake SD  
Dr. Dave Smith, Newport SD  
Mr. Brian Talbott, Nine Mile Falls SD  
Mr. Don Baribault, Northport SD  
Dr. Jake Dingman, Oakesdale SD  
Mr. Dan Read, Odessa SD  
Ms. Suzanne Savall, Orchard Prairie  
Ms. Sherry Cowbrough, Orient SD  
Mr. Kevin Young, Republic SD  
Dr. Ken Russell, Riverside SD  
Ms. Nancy Lotze, Selkirk SD  
Ms. Suzanne Schmick, St. John-Endicott SDs  
Mr. Ben Ferney, Valley SD  
Mr. John Adkins, Wellpinit SD

## **Private School Leaders**

Ms. Ashley Strine, Acting Administrator  
Windsong School  
Mr. Michael Dougherty, President  
Gonzaga Preparatory School  
Mr. Roger Gerstenberger, Head of Schools  
Northwest Christian Schools  
Ms. Gretchen Hausman, Principal  
Spokane First Presbyterian School  
Ms. Katie Rieckers, Director  
Catholic Schools  
Mr. Jamie Tender, Head of School  
Saint George's School  
Ms. Lorri Downs, Principal  
Southside Christian School  
Mr. Charlie Wilson, Principal  
Pullman Christian School

## **Public Charter Schools Leaders**

Mr. Travis Franklin, CEO  
Spokane International Academy  
Ms. Shauna Edwards, Executive Director  
Lumen High School