

August 20, 2020

Dear Tacoma-Pierce County Health Leaders,

This is a follow up to my email of August 17 where I shared perspectives and concerns about the all-virtual mandate messaging to schools in Pierce County. I don't know that each of you had an opportunity to read it before your meeting yesterday, but I know it captures the views of a great many citizens and voters of our county. I had the opportunity to watch much of your meeting, which furthered my understanding of how Dr. Chen and the Board are approaching these matters. I deeply appreciate your efforts, but feel compelled to offer some additional constructive feedback and policy suggestions to benefit all families in Pierce County.

Briefly, here are my greatest concerns:

1. Contrary to the expressed desires of the Governor and Superintendent of Public Instruction, this universal school format mandate appears unilateral from Dr. Chen, rather than a decision that ought to reside at the local school level. It is also contrary to the way other counties are delegating these decisions to schools, who are able to consider all factors, not just the health component. I strongly believe this should be a local school decision with Health Department input and recommendations. Pierce County citizens are being discriminated against, versus other counties, since school leaders/boards are in a much better overall position to decide what is best. In a nutshell, the Health Department should be in "recommendation space," rather than "decision space," on this complex issue.
2. Because of differing risks among different locales in our county, a blanket policy for all schools is illogical and discriminatory to schools/families that can operate safely (full-or part-time). Knowing the massive adverse consequences of all-virtual schooling vs. In-Person, *every attempt should be made to maximize the number of students who can be in person, subject to school's meeting guidelines*. To do otherwise is clearly sub-optimal and will be viewed as implementing a "shared misery" approach.
3. There is tremendous confusion now over whether schools have the legal authority to operate in person, while adhering to guidelines. Again, provided that schools can demonstrate that they are able to satisfy requirements, they ought to be given that option, if desired.
4. There seems to be an overwhelming focus on COVID-19 cases in Dr. Chen's decisions. While I agree this is a valid input, knowing what we know now about risks and the devastating impact of virtual- vs. In-Person-education on learning, socio-emotional health, family economics/disruption, and abuse, these pervasive factors justify even greater influence. For perspective, *nationally* there have been **27** deaths in ages 5-14 in a population of **41+million** kids and children are largely asymptomatic and do not readily transmit the disease (Europe schools are very encouraging in this regard). Meanwhile, we see skyrocketing incidences of suicide, abuse, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse among students. These other *known and pervasive* concerns should more than outweigh a focus on cases, where students are experiencing extremely low incidences of serious illness. I believe we're missing the forest for the trees. And, teachers/staff who need extra protection can be handled specifically by school leaders to reduce risk...just like any other employer is doing.
5. Schools in safer communities like Gig Harbor, AND private schools, ought to be given a chance to take the lead, provided they meet guidelines. This not only increases the number of students benefitting from In-Person learning, but it also: 1) provides useful "pioneers" for the benefit of the Health Department, OSPI, and all County schools and 2) removes the inherent *discrimination of this blanket policy against private schools* who are not taxpayer funded. Many private schools are ready to go and should be given that option... this latest mandate has caused *massive* disruption to enrollments, budgets, and families who want their kids in these schools. (And, how is the child care/YMCA alternative model safer than private schooling?!?) Finally, as a resident of Gig Harbor, this "mobility" argument to justify discrimination against our healthy community, especially knowing the risks of all-virtual, is

arbitrary to say the least, knowing that mobility is everywhere. I'm sorry, but this argument won't fly. Gig Harbor would be a great, low risk place to loosen the reins. In your hearts and minds, I have to believe you know this.

6. This all-virtual policy is completely contrary to the education community's desire to lower the achievement gap. It will now worsen considerably in Pierce County for the reasons you all know. *This is yet another reason why these decisions should be made by school leaders.*

For all of the above reasons, I urge you to reconsider this sweeping, discriminatory, and harmful policy and join with the other counties in Washington state who are delegating school format decisions to local schools. Thank you for your consideration and for your service. I am happy to meet up with any of you or to discuss by phone.

Respectfully,
Dennis Trittin
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