

Dear Dr. Chen,

After learning about your dictate to all schools in Pierce County to operate virtually, I feel compelled, as a concerned citizen from Gig Harbor, to share some important perspectives that I hope will offer new insights and lead you to reconsider this policy pronouncement. I thank you for your service to our county and empathize with the enormity and complexity of your role.

Briefly, I am a former Board Chair of a private school in Gig Harbor, an author/publisher of life skills curriculum to schools and of two parenting books, a prior instructor, an advocate for children, and previously a 28-year senior executive with Russell Investments. Thus, my perspectives run the gamut as parent, educator, mentor, strategist, and community leader.

To summarize, the following are my greatest concerns:

1. ***Applying an incomplete and narrow objective function to a much broader problem.*** In defense of your position, you argue that a blanket, all-virtual policy for all schools in the county, regardless of differing risks and protocols, is for reasons of equity and COVID-19 transmission limitation. As our Health Director, I can understand why you would assign great importance to the health aspects of reopening policy. Nonetheless, there are *many* other considerations (some of which also health related) that argue *strongly against* all-virtual education: 1) comparatively *poorer educational, socio-emotional, relational, and experiential outcomes* for *all* students versus in-person, 2) *worsening achievement gap* metrics due to student learning styles/proficiencies and economic/tech savvy capabilities of parents, 3) tremendous *familial and economic disruption*, especially for single parents and those unable to work from home to facilitate their student's learning, 4) increased physical and mental health risks to *all* children (depression/anxiety/suicide in this age demographic swamps the number of children who die from COVID-19), and 5) depriving *all* students of the benefits of trained, in-person teachers and counselors, which is particularly devastating to the children who need these experts most. *Our schools are expending tremendous effort to narrow the achievement gap and this policy runs completely counter to that objective.*

Given the incontrovertible evidence favoring in-person versus virtual education, this argues for a different objective function to inform your decision-making such as, *"maximize the number of students in Pierce County able to learn in person, subject to managing reasonable risks."* Such an objective function would benefit ALL families in Pierce County by being more holistic and giving the greatest number of children their best chances for a great education. *It is NOT the role of government to focus singularly on health risk minimization when crafting educational policy, especially when science and experience overwhelmingly favor in-person.* Parents, who know their children best, are now being robbed of choice to have their children learn in person.

2. ***Applying a generalized policy to all schools regardless of differential health risks and school capabilities is inherently discriminatory.*** We all know that there are significant differences in COVID-19 risks among the various locales and school districts within the county. Therefore, it behooves us to apply school- or locale-specific *recommendations*

when it comes to school format. To do otherwise discriminates against schools and students in healthier locations (e.g., Gig Harbor), schools with superior safety protocols, parents who desperately want/need in-person learning for their children, private schools whose revenue is tuition vs. taxpayer driven, parents who are economically or technologically incapable of overseeing excellent virtual education, and parents who can't work from home. *This blanket policy harms ALL students for the sake of "preventing" health risks for an age demographic with extremely low incidences of serious illness from COVID-19.* As such, it comes across as an excessive exercise in government control—*harming all students for the sake of reducing risk for a few.*

- 3. *Decision-making should be at a local school level rather than at a County Health Director level.*** In complex decisions such as these, decisions should be made by those most informed and experienced at complex, school-wide situations. I, and others, are deeply concerned that you are taking it upon yourself to mandate this generalized policy rather than having it made at the local school level, *as is the case with other WA counties.* Rather than delegating this decision to where it properly resides (and holding administrators accountable to upholding safety protocols), this decision is, and will be perceived by the electorate, as government overreach and control. *Residents and voters of Pierce County shouldn't be discriminated against versus other counties in the state who are wisely delegating these decisions to schools.* It is my understanding that our Governor, Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Pierce County Executive are supporting local school involvement in decisions rather than a mandated, generalized policy from the County Health Directors. Why would you operate otherwise?

Based on the above, I respectfully offer the following recommendations:

- 1. Delegate these decisions to school leaders, with accountability for adherence to health guidelines.* Feel free to offer your recommendations, but let the most informed make the final decisions.
- 2. If there is resistance from some public schools, seek out independent schools to serve as pioneer schools for in-person teaching for the benefit of all schools in the county.* I can provide names of schools whose leaders, parents, and students overwhelmingly favor in-person learning and who would gladly take the lead. Their experiences can inform policies and serve as encouragement for all schools who will eventually revert to in-person education. There is no litigation risk involved with private schools, and parents (who also vote!) would be strong proponents. This is a win-win for *all* schools, parents, and students!
- 3. Look to Gig Harbor to take the lead.* Like most healthy communities, Gig Harbor would be a great, low-risk option for which to relax your mandate. Let all schools in the county benefit from our experience as leaders of the in-person pack. Again, I can connect you with schools who would readily participate and are ready to go. Trust me, our community would overwhelmingly cheer this decision and respect your flexibility .

Let's maximize the educational experience for as many students as possible, subject to reasonable health and safety protocols. Let's give school leaders and parents a voice.

Thanks again, Dr. Chen, for listening and for your efforts in these challenging times. I would be happy to speak with, or meet with you in person or virtually, to further discuss.

Respectfully,  
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