

March 22, 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 Washington State School Directors' Association, representing the 1,477 locally elected school directors of Washington state, we appreciate the complexities of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. We thank you for your continued diligence and leadership as the situation has evolved, and we are counting on your use of science and data to continue evolving the health and safety guidance that you develop for the K-12 education system.

As the elected officials responsible for the local governance of Washington state's public education system, our members have also navigated these complexities on the local level, oftentimes amidst extreme pressures from their local communities and workforces. While we greatly appreciate the heroic efforts of students, parents, and staff to do their best despite the myriad of challenges they have faced, we know that hybrid learning is not an adequate replacement for in-person learning.

For most students, it is not sustainable long term. Learning and academic progress are spotty and inconsistent, with our most vulnerable students suffering the most. But more importantly, we are in the middle of a public health crisis, where large numbers of children and teens are suffering from hunger, neglect, abuse, and severe mental health challenges, including depression and suicidal thoughts. We want every student to have the opportunity for in-person learning, and we concur with Emergency Proclamation 21-05 addressing the Children and Youth Mental Health Crisis to intervene due to the social, emotional, and mental health impacts of remote learning.

To ensure that local school districts are able to meet the intent of Proclamation 21-05 and to prepare for the challenges of the upcoming 2021-22 school year, we have three requests that require expedited attention and consideration:

### **1. Adopt the recently updated CDC guidance on physical distancing in schools**

As you are aware, the CDC announced last week that they have revised their guidance on physical distancing, noting that schools can resume in-person learning safely while adjusting the physical distancing requirement for students from six feet to three feet in certain settings. We support this change and believe that it is both safe and necessary if schools are going to be able to provide the opportunity for all students to engage in in-person learning. We strongly urge you to immediately adopt the new CDC guidance for Washington state, leaving the decision as to whether schools implement the changes now, next month, or in the fall, to local control dependent on an individual district's ability to make the change without unintended consequences to students. All districts are diligently working to meet the intent of Emergency Proclamation 21-05, but for many, it will be nearly impossible with the six-foot requirement in place.

### **2. Clarify the qualifications for high-risk workers once they have been fully vaccinated**

Currently, Emergency Proclamation 20-46.2 *"prohibits employers, public or private, from failing to provide accommodation to high-risk workers."* Now that COVID-19 vaccinations have been made widely available for K-12 educator staff, we request that this proclamation be reviewed and amended so that employers may require an employee to submit verification of high-risk status from a medical provider if requesting to remain on remote assignment. In addition, we are seeking clarification as to whether or not a high-risk worker will still be considered as high-risk after being fully vaccinated. The current language in this proclamation unnecessarily encumbers the state's educator workforce capacity and is a barrier to school districts ability to meet the intent of Proclamation 21-05 *"to work to exceed the 30% minimum instructional hours, and must reach the school's maximum capacity and maximum frequency of on-campus, in-person instruction that the school can provide."*

### **3. Provide updated guidance and required safety measures for fall 2021 as soon as possible**

As you are aware, operating a governmental entity requires adherence to a wide variety of statutory, policy, and practical requirements/timelines. As governmental entities, school districts fall into the same category. At this moment, school boards and superintendents are deeply engaged in planning and preparation for the upcoming 2021-22 school year. They are developing budgets, determining necessary staffing levels, bargaining necessary changes to

working conditions, developing appropriate student course offerings, developing learning recovery plans, and identifying safe and appropriate transportation/maintenance schedules. All of this requires careful consideration with regards to equity, available resources, facility constraints, and local bargaining. To support these elected officials in doing their due diligence in this planning, now in the context of widely available vaccines for our educator workforce, we request that any updates to the Department of Health required safety measures, currently under review, be expedited and announced as soon as possible.

Our resolve to all of Washington's students is steadfast. As we work toward a return to stability for our students, staff, and communities, we appreciate our partnership with you and your consideration of these requests.

Respectfully signed with the unanimous support of the WSSDA Board of Directors, representing the elected officials charged with governing the 295 school districts of Washington state,



Rick Jansons  
President



Tim Garchow  
Executive Director