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## Schools and In-Person Learning in a COVID-19 Environment

### **Why were students not permitted to go back to a school campus for in-person education when the semester began in the fall?**

*The number of COVID-19 cases in Santa Barbara County was much higher at the beginning of the fall school semester than it is now, in mid-October. When there is a high prevalence of COVID-19 in the community, it is much more likely to be transmitted from person to person. The high risk of transmission was a barrier to a safe return to school campuses.*

### **How does the state measure the rate of COVID-19 and when it is safe to allow for in-person learning?**

*The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) has created a system of four tiers. The highest risk of transmission is the purple (widespread) tier. The tiers decrease to red (substantial), then orange (moderate), then yellow (minimal) which reflects the lowest risk of transmission. Each of these tiers have metrics related to the rate of COVID cases in a county and the percentage of COVID positive test results in the county. The case rate of COVID-19 is determined by the average number of cases in the past 7-days, divided by the total population of Santa Barbara County, and multiplied by 100,000. The percent positivity is determined by the total number of positive COVID-19 PCR tests divided by the total number of COVID-19 PCR tests reported in Santa Barbara County. The State updates this information every Tuesday based on data from the previous week which is defined as the previous Sunday/Saturday.*

### **When can students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade return to in-person, on campus learning?**

*When a County has officially been in the red tier for two weeks, the state permits kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade schools to reopen for in-person instruction. Santa Barbara County was notified on October 13 that our COVID-19 case rates have remained in the red tier and schools may reopen for in-person instruction. Our local Health Officer Order will be written to permit in-person instruction. Unfortunately, our local COVID case rate increased significantly at the beginning of November. Thus, we are in the purple tier and school that did not return to in-person learning previously cannot do so at this time.*

### **Who will decide when to return for in-person learning?**

*Each public and private school and its governing school board will determine when they will return to the campus for in-person instruction within the parameters of public health guidance. Schools can make the decision after the California Department of Public Health and the Santa Barbara County*

*Public Health Department (SBCPHD) have provided guidance that the COVID-19 case rate allows for school reopening. It is important to note that any in-person instruction, while in any of the four tiers, must adhere to the public health guidelines such as physical distancing- this determines the type of program a school may provide including a hybrid or full re-opening.*

**What factors do schools consider when deciding to return to a school campus?**

*Schools need to be able to have students on campus and maintain safe environments for both students and staff. Some of the considerations include: maintaining enough space for physical distancing between students and adults at schools. Schools need to be able to transport students safely, on buses or other means of transportation. Schools need to have enough staff to teach smaller groups of students as there is less risk of transmission when students are in small and stable groups. Routine surveillance testing of all staff must be in operation. Schools must adhere to the health and safety guidance provided by CDPH and SBCPHD. As noted earlier, schools cannot return to in-person learning under the purple tier if they were not already in-person, unless they have an approved elementary school waiver.*

**What about students who have special medical needs or who have family members who are at high risk for COVID-19?**

*Schools are offering families the choice to continue remote learning as an alternative to in-person learning. There are individual situations where students or staff are at a higher risk and other options are needed. Public health guidance does permit small cohorts for targeted and specialized services. The small cohorts must be no more than 16 individuals and specific guidelines must be met.*

**Will the return to school campuses and in-person learning be “normal” like it was before COVID?**

*Students and staff will be returning to schools in very different circumstances now than before COVID19. Schools will require face coverings, physical distancing of at least 6 feet, special cleaning and disinfecting, and many other actions that were not in place in the past. It is likely these changes will remain with us until COVID-19 is not the threat to our health and safety as it is today.*

**Will students return to remote learning if the COVID-19 case rate increases and our county moves to the purple tier?**

*As our county is now in the purple tier, we will increase routine testing of adult staff at our schools. We want to provide continuity for students and staff and limit going back and forth between remote and in-person learning. We will continue to close individual classes if there is one positive COVID-19 case identified to quarantine those in the class. If there are three or more lab confirmed COVID-19 cases at a school, with onset of symptoms or labs collected within 14-days of each other, and that are not from the same household, we will involve our Disease Control Team to aggressively address the risk of transmission and impacts of COVID-19. It is possible an entire school will need to close for 2 weeks if there are multiple cases within a 14-day period. This decision will be made in consultation between the school administration and Disease Control.*

*Schools that have reopened for in-person learning under the red tier will not be required to close if the county moves back into the purple tier. However, if a school has not opened while in the red tier, it will not be permitted to open if the county moves back to the purple tier.*

**What can we do to keep the risk of transmission low?**

*Our COVID-19 case rates and measures in Santa Barbara County are dependent upon all residents across the entire county. We all need to follow key behaviors that prevent transmission including wearing face coverings, maintaining physical distance, avoiding gatherings, and practicing good hygiene. If we are all committed to these behaviors, we will all be safer and healthier.*