

# *Governor Inslee's "Children & Youth Mental Health Crisis" Order: Questions & Answers*

On March 12, 2021, Governor Inslee announced an [executive order related to protecting the mental and behavioral health of children and youth in Washington](#). The order requires all public K–12 schools in Washington to provide each student with the opportunity to learn in-person at their school, for no fewer than two days per week, by April 19, 2021. Below are a series of questions and answer about the order, including its implementation and implications.

## **Is it safe to return to school in-person?**

Yes. Data and research gathered by the [Department of Health](#) and the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) show that, when health and safety requirements are followed, schools can reopen with low risk of virus transmission.

## **What safety requirements do schools need to follow to provide learning in-person?**

Schools are required to follow all health and safety requirements set by the [Department of Health](#) and the [Department of Labor & Industries](#). These include, but are not limited to, face coverings, health screening upon entry, physical distancing, hand hygiene, and disinfecting commonly touched surfaces.

## **If educators and school staff are vaccinated, why do schools need to continue following all the safety requirements?**

Although most school employees will be vaccinated by the end of March, students, and many of their family members, won't be. Until we have widespread vaccinations, we should expect to continue wearing face coverings, washing hands frequently, and engaging in other mitigation strategies.

## **Will all schools be required to reopen fully?**

No. Schools will be required to provide each of their students with the opportunity to learn in-person at their school for no fewer than two days per week. Those days may be half- or full-days.

## **Why aren't schools being told to go back to their normal schedules?**

As schools reopen, they are required to follow all health and safety requirements. One of the requirements includes maintaining a minimum of 6 feet of physical distance between all students and staff. Many school buildings do not have the physical space necessary to meet this requirement with all students and staff back in the building at once. To maintain 6 feet of



distance, many schools will need to operate in a hybrid model, where they rotate groups of students and staff between in-person and remote learning.

### **Will all students be required to learn in-person, even if they prefer to learn remotely?**

No. Schools will be required to provide each of their students with the *opportunity* to learn in-person, but the Governor is not mandating that all families make the choice for their students to learn in-person.

### **What prompted the Governor to take this action now?**

Data show that the impacts of the pandemic, including extended time in remote learning, have created an urgent need for schools to reopen for in-person learning. We now know that Washington's young people are calling crisis hotlines and receiving urgent mental health care in hospitals at rates much higher than usual.

There are academic impacts, too. This school year, the percentage of students disengaging from school has increased significantly. Increases in absences from school are especially pronounced among students experiencing poverty, students who are Native American/Alaska Native, students who are Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and students who are Latino. In addition, at the high school level, more students than ever are receiving grades of D, F, Incomplete, or No Credit. We know most students learn and perform at their best when they are in the classroom with their educators and peers.

### **Since it's late in the school year, wouldn't it be best to wait until next year to reopen the school buildings that aren't already open?**

No. Many of our students are navigating mental and behavioral health crises *now*. While schools were not designed to provide comprehensive mental health supports, reopening school buildings and providing students with a safe place where they can be among their peers and caring adults is a step in the right direction for many of our students.

### **How does this order affect alternative learning experience (ALE) programs who operate online only, even pre-pandemic?**

Schools following ALE learning requirements that don't typically provide in-person instruction will not be affected by this order. The order states that students must be provided with the *opportunity* to learn in-person. If the ALE program does not provide in-person instruction and the student/family wants to receive in-person instruction, then the student can seek that through the school district's other options or through their resident school district.

## **How will schools use their federal emergency relief funds to support school reopening?**

The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds provided by Congress have a wide variety of allowable uses. Schools are encouraged to use them to support safely reopening their buildings and to address impacts on student learning and well-being.

## **Is there data on the number of COVID-19 cases in schools?**

Yes. Each month, the Department of Health [posts a report](#) detailing the number of “outbreaks” (defined as two or more cases) within our school buildings. The report includes information about the outbreaks, including county, number and demographics of those infected, and the learning modality of the school (fully in-person, hybrid, or remote).

## **Is there data on how many students are receiving in-person learning?**

Yes. School districts report weekly the percentage of their students learning in-person, split by elementary, middle, and high school. Updated data will be [posted to the OSPI website](#) every Wednesday through the remainder of the school year.