

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Charlie Bermant, with local news and commentary for Thursday, August 6, 2020.

Among all of the questions we are facing the fate of the upcoming school year is paramount. This week Governor Jay Inslee said that for most of the state's students, in-class learning is unsafe and not recommended according to state health and education officials.

The Governor explained a three-category approach to assessing the risk of opening schools based on high, medium and low rates of infection risk. There are 25 counties in the high-risk category, affecting the largest numbers of students; the moderate category has nine.

Jefferson County is considered at low risk, along with Asotin, Garfield, San Juan and Wahkiakum. That means we had fewer than 25 cases per 100,000 residents in a recent two-week period. It is suggested that schools teach elementary students in-person and consider a hybrid model for middle and high students, splitting their time between in-person and remote learning, according to the county's official Facebook page.

The governor said this was only a recommendation – not a mandate – based on science, and that “public school districts and private schools are responsible for making these decisions.”

Inslee's concern is that opening schools too soon will create a landscape for outbreaks that would spread through families and then to the community. He urged local educational leaders to consider all the effects of in-person vs. remote learning.

The Port Townsend School District posted a reopening plan in June with promises to update it over the summer. Currently there occurs a series of meetings to plan for reopening, with a revised plan due for release on August 17.

Pandemic guidelines benefit from clarification. According to Jefferson County Health Officer Dr. Thomas Locke, all that contact outside your household should be limited to no more than five different people per week, not five people at a time.

Locke admits this sounds restrictive, but is actually protective. After months of these limits, people are inclined to let their guard down. A party can turn into something known as a super spreader, something that can lead to a huge outbreak. Locke quoted a study that said a small percentage of people – ten to twenty percent – are responsible for most of the outbreaks.

For the most part, Jefferson County residents are following the leaders. While many parts of the country have seen a massive surge in virus cases the county has added just 13 cases in a month's time, for a total of 54. Even as testing continues and cases increase the ratio of positive tests holds at 1.1%.

Currently, 5,156 tests have occurred with 5,053 turning up negative. Forty nine people are awaiting results.

The August primary is now in the rearview mirror, and the much-anticipated general election is now just 79 days away. Jefferson County reported a 60% voter turnout so far. Another count is scheduled for 4pm today, with the new results posted shortly after. Currently there are no races that are too close to call.

Elections Coordinator Quinn Grewell told KPTZ that elections have changed during the pandemic and require a greater level of preparation and planning. Due to these measures everything went smoothly according to Grewell.

The changes include a live stream of election processing and the rearrangement of processing rooms to adhere to social distancing guidelines.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon Monday through Saturday and at 5pm Monday through Thursday. You can contact us through news@kptz.org.

This is Charlie Bermant. Thank you for listening.