

March 9, 2020

Jeffrey Duchin, MD
Health Officer
Public Health — Seattle & King County

Kathy Lofy
State Health Officer and Chief Science Officer
Washington State Department of Health

Dear Dr. Lofy and Dr. Duchin,

Thank you for your tremendous work in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak. We know you are contemplating whether to broadly close schools. We are sure this is a difficult decision. We write not to advocate a position, but rather to share some critical information. Our particular concern is the potential impacts on hospitals' and health systems' ability to staff their facilities in the event of widespread school closures.

Recent snow-related closures and the experience of the COVID outbreak in Japan show that closures hamper the ability to staff hospitals. During disease outbreaks hospitals and health systems need to care not just for those affected by the disease but for many other urgent and emergent patients with heart attacks, cancer, burns, mental health and stroke care.

Feedback from hospitals/heath systems about school closures: We queried several hospitals in the region to understand how school closures would affect them. Their responses are below:

- Health system 1: If all schools were closed in King County our conservative estimate is about 1,500 to 2,000 employees would not report to work (as seen in snowstorms with school closures). This is about 10-14% of our workforce. With of impact of 10-14% we would be forced to reduce services. The number of staff with dependents under the age of 12 is about 4,000 (up to 28% of our workforce).
- Health system 2: About 3,800 of our staff have children under the age of 14. This represents about 42% of our workforce.
- Health system 3: About 33% of our staff have children under the age of 14.

*Estimates do not take into account how many families have older children who may be able to watch siblings or have other childcare arrangements.

Key takeaways from conversations with hospitals and health systems:

- Hospital/health systems in the Puget Sound region are already beginning to report challenges with staffing.
- Many workers are already staying home. Workers who are 60 years and older make up a significant part of the workforce – about 15-20% in hospitals. Hospitals also have pregnant and immune-compromised workers who are not currently working.
- Adding school closures to the already existing workforce shortage will be challenging.

Additional considerations:

- School closures may disproportionately impact the hourly workforce in hospitals and other industries because their options for alternate care may be less. Many of these hourly employees perform functions critical to our community's COVID-19 response, including cleaning and sanitization of facilities, public transportation workers for staff who take transit, and caregivers such as Medical Assistants and Certified Nursing Assistants.
- Should schools close, many daycares will likely follow suit, compounding the demands on working parents.
- Many families rely on grandparents and elderly family members for childcare, particularly in a pinch. This may further increase the risk of COVID-19 exposure to these particularly vulnerable populations.

We understand that when you consider whether to close schools, you must weigh the disruption to providing health care services against the larger goal of slowing the progress of the virus. We trust you will take all of this into consideration as you determine how to best protect our community.

Finally, if you make the decision to close schools, we would request as much advance notice as possible. This will give our hospital members, and their staff, the opportunity to make alternate plans.

Sincerely,



Cassie Sauer
President and CEO
Washington State Hospital Association