



## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Pediatric health care providers support plans to reopen schools**

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Seattle, WA -- The Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics supports the Washington State Department of Health's updated guidance to move toward the goal of having students physically present in school, with careful measures in place to keep students, teachers, school staff and communities safe.

"While we are still learning about the susceptibility of school-age children to SARS-CoV-2 infection and their role in community transmission, there is little evidence to indicate that schools have been a key driver of community transmission when proper precautions are taken, particularly elementary schools," says Elizabeth Meade, MD, FAAP, president of the Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. "We have learned critical lessons from schools that have already opened about how to best support teachers and school personnel. **Now is the time to use that information to more broadly prepare for kids to return.**"

Though nothing is without risk, Washington state's schools can bring kids back in person as safely as possible through preparation and thoughtful, careful sequencing, appropriate to community disease burden, age and other needs. The use of personal protective equipment like masks along with measures like diligent hand hygiene and social distancing are all strategies that schools can employ to keep kids, teachers and school staff safe. Adherence to protocols to identify cases, isolate people who are infected, and quarantine close contacts, and minimizing the mixing of groups can substantially limit the spread of SARS-CoV-2 in school settings.

**If we take the time now to prepare to bring kids back to school, informed by the disease burden in individual communities and according to age, special needs, and developmental and academic needs, we can do this.**

Bringing kids back to school is about more than academics, it is about children and adolescents' overall well-being, as schools are where so many children learn social and emotional skills, get healthy meals and exercise, and access mental health support. We just can't replicate those things adequately online.

We have seen alarming increases in serious mental health disorders in kids nationwide, and Washington state is no exception. Children have suffered socially, emotionally and developmentally during these

months of being isolated at home, and will continue to suffer in the absence of their peers, caring adults beyond their parents and caregivers, and the supports and structure of in-person school.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic youth ages 11-17 have been more likely than any other age group to suffer moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety and depression. In September 2020, over half of 11-17-year-olds surveyed reported having thoughts of suicide or self-harm more than half or nearly every day of the previous two weeks.

Getting kids back in school won't fix all of these challenges but it is an important step in the right direction. The updated guidance is reasonable, thoughtful and safe, reflecting our knowledge of the disease and employing proven infection prevention strategies – when balanced with the comprehensive impacts of kids staying home. The Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics is committed to ongoing learning about SARS-CoV-2 and preventing infection amongst children, families, school personnel and communities, and will work with the state Department of Health to modify guidance as new information becomes available.

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#### **About the WCAAP**

The Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics has advocated for the health and well-being of Washington's children and their families since 1934. The WCAAP represents over 1100 pediatric health care providers from across Washington State. Our mission is to optimize the health and well-being of children and their families while advancing pediatric care. WCAAP frames and leads the public discussion on child health issues, advances public policy to benefit children, and empowers pediatric health care providers to provide quality medical care.