KATE BROWN
Governor

December 23, 2020

Pat Allen
Director,
Oregon Health Authority
Salem, OR 97301

Colt Gill
Director,
Oregon Department of Education
Salem, OR 97310

Dear Director Allen and Director Gill,

I am writing this letter as we near the end of 2020 to take stock of our state's response to COVID-19 in schools, and provide further direction to you and your agencies as we move forward in 2021.

By this Friday, December 25, it will have been one hundred and fifty days since our state issued health metrics to guide the resumption of in-person instruction for students in Oregon's schools. Since this past summer, schools and local public authorities, educators and staff, parents and communities, have worked tirelessly to ensure learning and support for our students by any safe means necessary. On behalf of all Oregonians, we owe them deep gratitude for their hard work and sacrifice.

Oregonians and our students have been supported through the work of your state agencies and staff, providing comprehensive guidance outlining clear health and safety protocols to mitigate risk and save lives in our communities. The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) has provided hours upon hours of ongoing technical assistance for schools to help them keep students and staff safe when implementing even the most limited options for in-person instruction. ODE and the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) have expanded guidance to grant reasonable exceptions, when prudent, for in-person instruction of children in kindergarten through third grade, students most in need, and for small and remote schools.

Oregon's school guidance has gone further than most other states in sharing tools and best practices for school leaders, teachers, and other education professionals. The school guidance has delivered the best information to help schools to make sound decisions, implement sustainable and effective COVID-19 operational plans, deliver new modes of distance learning, and ensure equitable student engagement and continuity of mental health support.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, I've advocated for additional federal emergency relief funds to bolster public schools and child care. This included $109 million in CARES Act funds that were distributed to public schools in 2020, and additional funding for Oregon schools in 2021 that will be provided under the emergency relief bill passed by Congress this week.

As Governor, I've distributed to Oregon public schools another $28 million to get students and families the technology and internet access they need, and called a Special Session of the Oregon Legislature this week to appropriate another $50 million in state aid to support public schools to transition to in-person learning. These resources can be used now to extend support to students around academic, social emotional, and mental health needs, and to implement safety protocols. The Legislature also passed legislation providing reasonable liability protections for public and private schools during the remainder of the COVID-19 emergency.

As 2021 approaches and we look to the remaining school year just over the horizon, it is clear that the greatest gift we can give to Oregon's children this holiday season is to redouble our efforts to act responsibly and reduce the spread of COVID-19 in our communities. Our students' learning, resilience, and future well-being depend on all of us.

Each and every Oregonian must do our part now to be disciplined and vigilant, to socially distance, wear facial coverings, avoid large gatherings, and follow other necessary public health requirements. The alternative is for Oregonians to remain at risk from the disease for far longer, and for perhaps 90% of Oregon's students to continue on the unpromising path of spending the remainder of their school year locked out by this virus from their classrooms and youth activities, where they best learn, grow, and find connection, safety, and support.

From the beginning of this pandemic, Oregon has been guided by data and science and taken a cautious approach. We've looked to our health experts and the experience of other states to guide our actions. It has become clear that when community spread is reduced and schools follow required health and safety protocols, there is low-risk of transmission and illness when students resume in-person instruction. The experience of Oregon schools that have operated in-person over the last many months while adhering to the *Ready Schools, Safe Learners* guidance has demonstrated this fact — in addition to communities across the country that have returned children to the classroom.

The long-term benefits of both heading off an emerging mental health crisis for our children and youth, and addressing the academic challenges that are becoming prevalent for far too many students in the absence of in-person learning, now far outweigh the short-term risk. I am confident that if all Oregonians do our part over the holidays and in the new year, our schools, educators and local public health officials will have had the time, the on-the-ground experience, and now the resources to return our students to school.

As Governor, I am calling for the following actions based on our children's welfare:

First, it is imperative that Oregon's local school boards, superintendents, educators, and school employees work together toward the resumption of in-person instruction to the greatest extent possible – prioritizing elementary education. To this end, I'm asking for the continued support and partnership of your agencies with local school districts, educators, and communities to ensure these critical decision-making processes continue to be grounded in sound science, public health and safety. It is my hope that more Oregon schools, especially elementary schools, will transition to in-person instruction by February 15, 2021.

Second, following my announced prioritization of educators and school staff for COVID-19 vaccinations this week, I'm directing OHA to partner with schools to access on-site, rapid testing as a safeguard to quickly address symptomatic individuals and those with potential exposure to COVID-19 to protect students and staff and to minimize quarantine times in public schools that resume in-person instruction. Priority should be given to elementary students, educators, and staff in communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

Third, effective January 1, 2021, Oregon's COVID-19 Health Metrics for Returning to In-Person Instruction will become advisory rather than mandatory. Moving forward, the decision to resume in-person instruction must be made locally, district by district, school by school. In addition to schools continuing to adhere to required health and safety protocols and working in close consultation with their local public health authority in understanding and considering the metrics, teachers, school staff, parents and students should be engaged in this decision-making process to allow schools to make the best choice for their community and their students.

Many states around the country, including Washington, have advisory metrics. As our neighbors to the north have demonstrated, this does not mean schools can resume in-person instruction without regard for COVID-19 spread in the community, but instead should carefully consider the metrics in their local context, the needs of students and families, and readiness to implement health and safety protocols. As we move into a new year, we must all rise to the challenges that COVID-19 presents and prioritizing our children is most urgent.

Fourth, consistent with ongoing updates to the *Ready Schools, Safe Learners* guidance and prior quarterly review of Oregon's COVID-19 Health Metrics for Returning to In-Person Instruction, I'm directing OHA and ODE to evaluate and provide any needed updates, based on scientific data and evidence, to the appropriate thresholds for resumption of in-person instruction. Any updates to the COVID-19 Health Metrics should be completed no later than January 19, 2021.

Fifth, I'm directing ODE to collaborate with OHA to align the *Ready Schools, Safe Learners* guidance and Oregon OSHA rules to ensure all necessary health and safety procedures and protocols are included to allow maximum access to in-person instruction in keeping with reasonable health and safety standards.

Notwithstanding these actions, all schools subject to Executive Order 20-29, must continue to fully comply with the mandatory portions of the *Ready Schools, Safe Learners* guidance and other supplemental guidance issued by OHA and ODE.

I look forward to convening my Governor's Medical Advisory Panel and the Healthy Schools Reopening Council in January to review additional updates in guidance and metrics that you and your agencies may bring forward.

Sincerely,

Governor Kate Brown