

Since the early days of the coronavirus pandemic here in North Idaho, Panhandle Health District (PHD) has worked with the Coeur d'Alene School District, sharing information and consulting on questions school district leaders may have in regards to protecting the health of students, school employees and the community at large. The Coeur d'Alene School District has sought Panhandle's expertise and feedback as it developed its reopening plans this summer, including how best to monitor local coronavirus trends to assess the risk of bringing over 10,000 students and hundreds of school employees back for school this fall.

The school district developed an appropriate set of metrics for its needs, and each week Panhandle Health District provides data for the school district's tracking model as well as trendline projections by our epidemiologists. In August the Board of Trustees for the school district decided to begin the school year in its moderate risk (orange) category, with students attending two days in person and three days remotely. PHD supports this decision as it will aid in the critical act of social distancing and help schools carefully bring students and staff back together this month. Social distancing, the use of masks, thorough hand-washing, staying home when sick and the self-monitoring of COVID-19 symptoms are essential precautions for our school communities to practice this fall.

Panhandle Health District recently moved Kootenai County's risk level from moderate (orange) to minimal (yellow). The trend is encouraging, but we await the impact of Labor Day weekend activities and the reopening of schools on our case numbers. We are hopeful that we will not see a surge in virus transmission that may justify moving Kootenai County back into the moderate (orange) risk category. A cautious start to the new school year, such as that planned by Coeur d'Alene Public Schools, is a responsible staged approach to the reopening given the unknowns as we go forward into the fall.

Panhandle Health District will continue to partner with the school district and offer our support for the decisions of its leadership.

Lora Whalen, Director  
Panhandle Health District