

# Port Townsend offers a glimpse of in-person schooling in the era of COVID-19

By [ASHLEY GROSS](#) · OCT 13, 2020

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*Before entering the school, students at Blue Heron Middle School in Port Townsend go through a screening process to prevent anyone who might show COVID-19 symptoms from entering.*

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4:26

On a recent sunny fall morning, a school bus pulled up in front of Blue Heron Middle School in Port Townsend. A few kids got off, but before they could enter the school, they had to go through a new pandemic-era procedure.

They all wore face masks and lined up on blue marks painted onto the concrete. An educator named Alice Fraser asked each one a series of questions.

“So in the last 24 hours, have you had any of the following symptoms not normal to you: fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting or diarrhea?” Fraser asked. “In the last 14 days, have you been in close contact with a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 or tested positive yourself?”

Next, another instructor held a thermometer up to each student’s head.

After getting cleared, the kids headed off to class, where they stay in a cohort of just 15 students.

While school in most districts in the state is virtual right now, Port Townsend on the Olympic Peninsula offers a window into in-person learning amid the pandemic. The small city of just under 10,000 people is not that far from King and Snohomish counties as the crow flies. But it’s a ferry ride away, and in terms of the coronavirus pandemic, it’s like a different world.

Because of the low rate of cases in Jefferson County, elementary and middle school students have the option to go to school twice a week in person. The other school districts in the county — Chimacum, Quilcene and Brinnon — also are offering a hybrid of in-person and remote learning.

High school students are learning online because it was too difficult to group them in small cohorts when they take such a wide variety of classes, said Sarah Rubenstein, communications director for the Port Townsend School District. Some high schoolers come twice a week for in-person support akin to study hall, she said.

## **'A LITTLE STRANGE'**

But school here in fall 2020 is not really like school a year ago.

“It’s been a little strange,” said Callen Johnson, 13, who’s in eighth grade.

Instead of moving to different classrooms for different subjects as middle schoolers normally do, Callen and the other 14 or so students in his cohort stay in one classroom and the teachers rotate in and out. Many of the teachers leave their doors and windows open to allow for more ventilation.

As for being assigned to a group of just 15 kids, Callen said it’s working out OK.

“Mostly I’d say it’s pretty good because what I’ve heard from my friends it seems that everyone has at least one person that they’re close to in each of their cohorts and I think they did that on purpose,” he said.

It helps that it's a smallish school of about 280 kids. Some of them have opted to do 100 percent remote learning. For the students doing the hybrid model, half come to school on Mondays and Thursdays, and the other half on Tuesdays and Fridays. The rest of the school week, they work on assignments at home. Callen said he's glad to be attending in person.

"I missed people," he said. "We're social animals. We need people, and that was something that more or less got taken away for four or five months there. So it was a little rough for me and a lot of other people I know."

## **IN-PERSON VS. REMOTE**

Most school districts in the state are not offering in-person learning, with some exceptions for students with special needs. Some districts such as Puyallup planned to offer in-person instruction to younger children but then had to postpone that as coronavirus case numbers spiked in recent weeks.

The Washington State Department of Health has created a decision tree for school districts to use in determining at what point to bring students back into school buildings for face-to-face instruction. When the 14-day coronavirus case rate is below 25 per 100,000 people, districts are encouraged to offer full-time, in-person learning for all elementary students and hybrid learning for middle and high school. The most recent 14-day case rate for Jefferson County was 25 per 100,000 people. Rubenstein said Port Townsend is offering a hybrid of in-person and remote learning for elementary students on the advice of local health officials.

When the two-week case rate is between 25 and 75 per 100,000, the Department of Health recommends distance learning and says districts can "consider expanding in-person learning to elementary students" and eventually offer a hybrid model to older students if COVID-19 case numbers stay low. When the case rate over two weeks exceeds 75 per 100,000, the department "strongly" recommends distance learning with some limited in-person learning for small groups of high-needs students, such as children with disabilities or those experiencing homelessness.

In King County, the most recent data showed a two-week case rate of 86 per 100,000 people. The Pierce County 14-day case rate was 90 per 100,000 as of Oct. 12.

So district leaders — and parents struggling to balance remote learning and work — are watching to see how in-person instruction goes in places like this. The Port Townsend district worked with the Jefferson County Public Health Department to come up with protocols. To the kids, it means a lot of rules.

"I'd like to hug my friend, but they tell us not to, and high fives and stuff aren't allowed," said Olivia McGinnis, who's 12 and in seventh grade.

## **SOCIAL DISTANCING AT SCHOOL**

Teachers and other school staff are the ones enforcing social distancing.

Jef Waibel walked a group of boisterous seventh-graders to the science classroom.

“These guys had a lot of sugar this morning,” Waibel said. “It’s a beautiful day so we like to walk the long way.”

Educators like Waibel have had to adjust to a new system of teaching this year. They teach some classes face to face and other classes online. Waibel said the online instruction has been a bit challenging.

“(I’m) getting better at it, I hope, but it’s not easy to not be able to see their reactions,” he said, before reminding a group of students to stay 6 feet apart.

What feels remarkable amid a pandemic is hearing the hubbub of kids joking around together at school.



*Students are assigned to cohorts of about 15 people that they stay with for the entire school day.*

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## EDUCATOR PERSPECTIVE

Of course, even in small groups there’s still risk. District officials said they’ve taken a lot of measures to mitigate risk. Melinda Pongrey, who teaches math to students who need extra help, said she’s still nervous.

"I'm uncomfortable with being here, but my schedule is mostly remote work with people," she said, adding that she contacts a lot of students who are doing remote learning to offer help with math. For the students she sees in person at school, "I tend to bring kids outside or make sure there's lots of ventilation. So I haven't been completely comfortable. I'm on the older spectrum."

But Pongrey said she's glad to see her colleagues and the kids.

That's something that Cole Russell said is really important to him. He's a paraeducator who works one on one with a student with special needs. He said there's something powerful about seeing people face to face.

"I'm with a guy who's just super radiant," he said. "When we walk into a (general education) class and they look a little beat down or whatever, I'm like, 'Oh, I got my guy,' and he brings the light into the room, and we all need that."

The school district has not had any confirmed coronavirus cases so far in students or staff. The numbers in the county have ticked up somewhat in October.